

# Many babies born to immigrants are being labeled too small incorrectly

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One of the first things people ask new parents is how much does their baby weigh.

For some immigrant parents, especially [South Asians](#), the question may be stressful. Many of their newborns are incorrectly diagnosed as being significantly underweight, meaning they could be at higher risk of developmental issues.

Researchers at St. Michael's Hospital say many of these infants are in fact the correct birthweight for their ethnic group and should not be compared to those of babies of Canadian-born mothers.

The researchers, led by Dr. Joel Ray, have developed the first "newborn weight curves" for specific [ethnic groups](#) across Canada. Birthweight curves are graphs used to plot how one baby's weight compares to others of the same age. A baby whose birthweight is in the lowest tenth percentile of the curve is deemed to be "small for [gestational age](#)" (SGA).

The new curves and his related research were published today in the *Journal of [Obstetrics and Gynaecology](#)* Canada.

Dr. Ray examined 760,000 live births in Ontario, which has 55 per cent of Canada's immigrants. He found that babies born to mothers from each region of the world, except Europe and other [Western countries](#), had significantly lower birthweights – up to 250 grams less -- than those for

infants of Canadian-born mothers.

He found that 67 of every 1,000 babies born to parents from Africa or the Caribbean were at risk of being classified as significantly underweight if plotted on an outdated Canadian curve instead of the new world region-specific curve.

Even more troublesome was his finding that 116 of every 1,000 South Asian babies – more than one in 10 -- were at risk of being misclassified under the Canadian curve.

"That's unacceptable in my mind," said Dr. Ray. "There are all these parents who are very excited about having a baby, and now they might have concerns their baby is not big enough—something that is not true and not especially welcoming."

Dr. Ray also examined how many babies were being incorrectly labeled as too heavy, or in the ninetieth percentile in birthweight. When correctly diagnosed, these babies may need to be delivered early; thus, a misdiagnosis may result in unnecessary elective cesarean sections.

The current Canadian curve misses as many as six in 10 Southeast Asian/Pacific and South Asian babies who are big compared to others in their ethnic groups.

Birthweight is important not just for parents' peace of mind. It is also one of the essential yardsticks used to measure a baby's progress or failure to thrive in its first days and weeks.

"Our findings have potential impact in several ways," Dr. Ray said. "The number of new immigrant [parents](#) and infants affected is sizable, meaning that there is a large target group in need of new birthweight curves."

Secondly, recent immigrants may not understand the implications of having a significantly underweight infant and may lack the linguistic, social, financial or transportation resources to effectively follow-up with pediatric care.

"By implementing our modified birthweight charts, a large number of [newborns](#) will be spared an unnecessarily prolonged stay in hospital, special biochemical and genetic testing, and follow-up with a general or developmental pediatrician," Dr. Ray said. "This lowers the burden on not only the child and their parent, but also on limited in-hospital and pediatric clinic resources within the ever-busy GTA. "

**More information:** The new curves can be found at [www.stmichaelshospital.com/birthweights.php](http://www.stmichaelshospital.com/birthweights.php)

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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