

New global report says US lags behind 130 other nations in preterm birth rate

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Preterm babies are born at a higher rate in the United States than in 130 other countries of the world, including many poorer nations, according to the just-released report *Born Too Soon: The Global Action Report on Preterm Birth*.

The report, containing the first-ever estimates of preterm birth rates by country, was published today by The March of Dimes Foundation, The Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health, Save the Children, and The World Health Organization, and represents almost 50 United Nations agencies, universities, and organizations.

The report ranks the U.S. 131st in the world in terms of its preterm birth rate of 12.0 per 100 live births, almost tied with Somalia, Thailand, and Turkey. Nearly half a million babies are born too soon in the U.S. each year.

"This report offers conclusive evidence that the United States rate of preterm birth has been far too high for far too long," says Dr. Jennifer L. Howse, president of the March of Dimes. "While our country excels in helping preemies survive, we have failed to do enough to prevent preterm births and help more mothers carry their babies full-term."

Born Too Soon finds that 15 million babies worldwide are born preterm each year, and more than one million die due to preterm complications. Of these babies, the report notes, three-quarters could be saved if current cost-effective interventions were made available to all.

Preterm birth (birth before 37 weeks completed gestation) is the leading cause of newborn death in the U.S. Babies who survive an early birth often have breathing problems, cerebral palsy, intellectual disabilities, and other lifelong problems. Even babies born just a few weeks early have higher rates of hospitalization and illness than full-term infants. In addition to the human costs, preterm birth also has high economic costs: more than \$26 billion annually, according to the Institute of Medicine.

Dr. Howse said prevention of preterm birth can be accelerated, with a variety of known, effective health interventions, including:

- giving all women of childbearing age in the U.S. access to health care, including adolescents, and including care before, between, and during pregnancy;
- behavioral changes to reduce the risk of an early birth, such as not smoking during pregnancy;
- progesterone treatments for women who have had a previous preterm birth;
- better management of fertility treatments that result in multiple gestations (twins, triplets or higher);
- hospital quality improvement initiatives to reduce early inductions and Cesarean deliveries before a full 39 weeks of pregnancy unless medically necessary.

"This report underscores the need for action to reduce premature birth in the U.S., and state and territorial health officials have a critical role in championing and implementing proven solutions," says David L. Lakey, M.D., president, Association of State and Territorial Health Officials and Commissioner, Texas Department of State Health Services.

"Interventions that promote full term, 39-week pregnancies and improve the health of babies can significantly reduce health care costs."

In February, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announced "Strong Start," an initiative that includes funding for enhanced prenatal care, hospital quality improvement programs, and a co-branded educational effort with the March of Dimes "Healthy [Babies](#) are Worth the Wait" campaign to let women know that if their pregnancy is healthy, it's best to wait for labor to begin on its own rather than scheduling a delivery.

On November 17, 2012, organizations around the world will observe the second World Prematurity Day to raise awareness that [preterm birth](#) is a serious problem worldwide.

More information: Born Too Soon and an interactive map showing the preterm birth rates in the 184 countries in the report are available online at marchofdimes.com/borntoosoon.

For a state-by-state breakdown of preterm birth rates within the U.S., see the March of Dimes 2011 Premature Birth Report Card online at marchofdimes.com/prematurity.

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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