

# Maternal obesity increases risk of newborn death in sub-Saharan Africa where obesity is rising at alarming rate

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"Sub-Saharan Africa already has the highest rates of neonatal death in the world. Whilst overall levels of obesity are currently fairly low by global standards, obesity is actually a rapidly emerging problem, with 5% of women presently classed as obese"\*, explains lead author Jenny Cresswell from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

By 2030, over a quarter of adults (almost 186 million) are predicted to be overweight in sub-Saharan Africa, and nearly a fifth of adults will be obese. Babies born to obese mothers are at increased risk of a range of complications including admission to neonatal care, macrosomia (excessive birthweight), low Apgar score, and death.

The new analysis is based on data from The Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) from 27 countries in sub-Saharan Africa. The researchers analysed over 81 000 pregnancies involving deliveries of single babies between 2003 and 2009 to assess the risk of [neonatal death](#) by a mother's body mass index (BMI).

The estimates suggest that babies of obese mothers had about 50% greater odds of their baby dying in the first 4 weeks of life (adjusted odds ratio 1.46) than women who were of optimum weight, even after adjusting for certain factors known to affect the risk of neonatal death including maternal age, educational level, and birth order.

This association was strongest in the first 2 days of life when the odds of neonatal death was 62% greater for obese women and 32% higher for overweight women compared with mothers of optimum weight.

The authors conclude, "This is the first time maternal obesity has been recognised as a risk factor in this setting. We now need more research to confirm the exact causes of death for these babies and a strategy to educate women in these countries about maintaining a healthy weight during pregnancy."\*

In a linked Comment, Ellen Nohr from Aarhus University in Denmark says: "The findings from sub-Saharan Africa are in accordance with previous studies on maternal obesity and neonatal survival from high income countries, which is reassuring in a scientific sense but also alarming. These findings force us to see the global burden of [obesity](#) on reproductive health in a new perspective, where complications attributable to [maternal obesity](#) in low-income countries may far outnumber the burden seen in affluent countries."

She adds: "Good longitudinal data...could reveal causes that are easily prevented if obese [women](#) are screened for diseases during pregnancy and deliver in a facility with emergency obstetric and neonatal care."

**More information:** Study online: [www.thelancet.com/journals/lan ...](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lan...)  
[/12/60869-1/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lan...)

Provided by Lancet

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