

US preterm birth rate shows 5-year improvement

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The U.S. preterm birth rate dropped for the fifth consecutive year in 2011 to 11.7 percent, the lowest in a decade, giving thousands more babies a healthy start in life and saving billions in health and social costs.

Four states – Vermont, Oregon, New Hampshire, and Maine earned an "A" on the March of Dimes 2012 [Premature Birth](#) Report Card as their preterm birth rates met the March of Dimes 9.6 percent goal. Although, the US preterm [birth rate](#) improved, it again earned a "C" on the Report Card.

"These results demonstrate that many premature births can be prevented with the right policies and bold leadership," said March of Dimes President Dr. Jennifer L. Howse. "Our national progress in reducing premature births over the past five years shows that when [infant health](#) becomes a priority, babies benefit. We must implement proven interventions and accelerate our investment in new research to prevent preterm birth so one day every baby will get a healthy start in life."

The US preterm birth rate peaked in 2006 at 12.8, after rising steadily for more than two decades, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. It dropped to 11.7 in 2011, the lowest in a decade.

All this improvement means not just healthier babies, but also a potential savings of roughly \$3 billion in health care and [economic costs](#) to society, said Dr. Howse. About 64,000 fewer babies were born preterm in 2010, when compared to 2006, the peak year.

Dr. Howse attributed the improved rates to an expansion of successful programs and interventions, including actions by state health officials in 48 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, who formally set goals to lower their preterm birth rates 8 percent by 2014 from their 2009 rate, based on a challenge issued in 2011 by the Association of State and Territorial [Health Organizations](#).

On the 2012 Report Card, 45 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico saw improvement in their preterm birth rates between 2009 and 2011, earning 16 of them better grades.

The largest declines in premature birth occurred among babies born at 34 to 36 weeks of pregnancy, but the improvement was across the board. Every racial and ethnic group benefitted, and there were fewer preterm babies born at all stages of pregnancy.

The March of Dimes "Healthy Babies are Worth the Wait" campaign urges health care providers and patients not to schedule a delivery until at least 39 completed weeks of pregnancy, unless there is a medical reason to do so. Many important organs, including the baby's brain and lungs, are not completely developed until then. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services "Strong Start" initiative is partnering with the March of Dimes to raise awareness about the importance of a full term pregnancy through paid advertising support and collaboration with hospitals to improve perinatal care.

The March of Dimes Report Card compares each state's preterm birth rate to the March of Dimes goal of lowering the rate to 9.6 percent of all live births by 2020. The Report Card information for the U.S. and states are available online at: marchofdimes.com/reportcard.

The [Report Card](#) also gauges states' progress toward lowering their preterm birth rates by tracking contributing factors.

- 7 states and the District of Columbia reduced the percentage of uninsured women of childbearing age;
- 43 states the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico lowered the late [preterm birth](#) rate, infants born between 34 and 36 weeks gestation.

Worldwide, 15 million babies are born too soon each year and more than one million of those infants die as a result of their early births. The US ranked 131 out of 184 countries, according to a May 2012 global report on premature birth issued by the March of Dimes and several partners. This November 17th, the March of Dimes and its global partners will mark the second World Prematurity Day by asking everyone to post a story about a baby born too soon at <http://www.facebook.com/WorldPrematurityDay>. The page will feature an interactive world map showing the home place for each story told.

Also on Nov. 17, the Empire State Building in New York City will be shining in purple light to symbolize hope for a healthy start for more babies.

Provided by March of Dimes Foundation

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