

US infant deaths at lowest rate ever: CDC

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But American babies still die at rates that are higher than other affluent countries.

(HealthDay)—The number of U.S. infants who die before their first birthday continues to decline and is at a historic low, health officials reported Thursday.

Between 2012 and 2013, the rate dropped only slightly, from 5.98 deaths per 1,000 births to 5.96. But that's part of a long-term trend: Since 2005, when infant mortality stood at 6.86 per 1,000 births, the rate has fallen by 13 percent, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Every single time an infant dies in the first year of life it is a tragedy for a family," said report author T.J. Mathews, a demographer at CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

However, "in 2013, we saw the lowest infant mortality rate ever," he said. "That's good news. There were many years when the rate was

steady and wasn't declining, then in 2009 we started to see some declines, and we are continuing to see that. It's not a sharp decline, but it's going in the right direction."

In 2013, 23,446 infants died in the United States, 208 fewer than in 2012, the researchers found. "Not long ago, we were around 28,000 to 30,000 deaths," Mathews said. "There are still a lot of infant deaths, but that there are fewer means there have been positive changes."

For most groups, the infant death rate remained stable. However, [death rates](#) among Puerto Ricans and Cuban-Americans dropped significantly—14 percent for Puerto Rican women and 40 percent for Cuban-American women.

Mathews noted that the disparity in infant deaths between blacks and whites persists. The infant death rate for blacks is double that of whites. "That sad fact has been constant," he said.

Dr. David Mendez, a neonatologist at Nicklaus Children's Hospital in Miami, said, "Access to care seems to be the driving force behind these disparities."

Most infant deaths occur among babies born early with [birth](#) defects. Many deaths are also due to preterm delivery.

In 2013, [infants](#) born at 37 to 38 weeks of gestation (early term) had death rates 63 percent higher than for babies born at full term, according to the report.

For multiple births, the infant death rate was almost 26 per 1,000 births. That's five times the rate among single births, the researchers said.

Other causes of infant deaths include sudden infant death syndrome

(SIDS) and accidents, Mathews said.

Also in 2013, 36 percent of infant deaths were due to preterm-related causes, such as short gestation and [low birth weight](#). Another 15 percent were due to sudden, unexpected [infant death](#), including unspecified causes and accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed, the researchers said.

Mathews said that the U.S. still has higher [infant mortality](#) rates than other countries such as Sweden and Japan, where the rate is fewer than 3 deaths per 1,000 births.

Dr. Edward McCabe, chief medical officer of the March of Dimes, agreed that "prematurity is the driving force behind many infant deaths."

Mendez said that babies born under 2 pounds 2 ounces make up only 0.7 percent of all births, but they account for 47 percent of all infant deaths.

The most important way for women to reduce the odds that their baby will die is to carry the infant to full term, McCabe said. Second, women taking advantage of reproductive technology should have only one embryo implanted, he said.

Mendez added that prenatal care is key in preventing preterm births. "Prenatal care is vital," he said. "That can make all the difference in the world."

Women shouldn't drink, smoke or use drugs during pregnancy. They also should watch their weight, get moderate exercise and get regular check-ups, Mendez said.

"We owe it to babies born in the U.S. to do a better job," McCabe said.

More information: Learn more about infant deaths at the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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