

Universal screening using simple device could save countless babies' lives, say perinatal experts

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Congenital heart defects could be spotted in newborn babies more easily and equitably by using a simple screening test, experts say.

In a new comment article [published](#) in *The Lancet*, perinatal [experts](#) describe the [benefits](#) and importance of universal screening for using pulse oximetry where a small device lightly attached to a finger measures blood oxygen levels.

This [screening tool](#) has previously been shown to increase detection rates of critical congenital heart defects to over 90% and has already been rolled out in most of Europe, the U.S., and Canada.

However, despite [reviews](#) and public consultations, pulse oximetry has yet to be formally rolled out across the UK, and the authors note that, on average, around half of all critical congenital heart defects aren't diagnosed at birth, and up to 30% of babies are discharged home with a critical defect undiagnosed.

Professor Andrew Ewer, Emeritus Professor of Neonatal Medicine at the University of Birmingham and corresponding author of the comment article, said, "There is compelling evidence that universal screening using pulse oximetry would not only save babies lives by potentially diagnosing congenital heart defects, it would also be a fairer and more equitable way to spot a range of conditions."

"Unfortunately, there is no universal screening in the UK at the moment, trailing behind other countries such as the US and most of Europe, and while more than three-quarters of maternity networks in the UK have adopted [pulse oximetry](#), it remains a postcode lottery for families about whether it's used in their trust."

More information: Andrew K Ewer et al, Newborn pulse oximetry screening: time for equity in the UK?, *The Lancet* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(24\)00417-3](#)

Provided by University of Birmingham

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