

Premature Births at a Glance

- Babies born before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy are called premature.
- The rate of premature birth has increased by more than 30 percent since 1981.
- Premature babies are at increased risk for newborn health complications, as well as *lasting disabilities, such as mental retardation, cerebral palsy, lung and gastrointestinal problems, vision and hearing loss and death.*
- Most premature babies (71.2 percent) are born between 34 and 36 weeks of gestation.
- All premature babies are at risk for health problems, but those born before about 32 weeks of gestation face the highest risk. These babies usually are very small, and their organs are less developed than those of babies born later.
- About 25 percent of preterm births result from early induction of labor or Cesarean delivery due to pregnancy complications or health problems in the mother or the fetus.
- Most preterm births are a result of spontaneous preterm labor, either by itself or following spontaneous premature rupture of the membranes.

Data Source: Preterm Birth Fact Sheet, March of Dimes, February 2007.

- Babies who died of preterm-related causes accounted for 36.5 percent of infant deaths in 2005, up from 34.6 percent in 2000.
- Mortality rates for infants born even a few weeks early, or "late preterm" (between 34-36 weeks gestation), were three times the rates for full-term infants.
- Low birthweight and preterm birth are leading causes of infant mortality, and the rates of both have increased steadily since the mid-1980s. The rise in multiple births from the increased use of assisted reproductive technology and increases in Cesarean sections and inductions of labor for preterm infants have contributed to this increase.
- The percentage of preterm births ranged from 10.7 percent of births to Asian/Pacific Islander mothers to 18.4 percent of births to non-Hispanic black mothers. This contributes to the difference in infant mortality rates by race and ethnicity.
- After rapid declines from 1983-2000, the infant mortality rate for very preterm infants (less than 32 weeks) did not decline from 2000-2005. In 2005, the infant mortality rate for very preterm infants was 183.24 per 1,000, 75 times the rate of 2.42 for full-term infants.
- Only 0.8 percent of births occurred at less than 28 weeks gestation, but they accounted for nearly half (46.4 percent) of all infant deaths in the United States in 2005.

Data Source: "Infant Mortality Statistics from the 2005 Linked Birth/Infant Death Data Set, " Vol. 57, No. 2 of the National Vital Statistics Report, National Center for Health Statistics.

- Mortality rates were three times higher at one year and six times higher in the first week for infants born at 34 to 36 weeks gestation than for infants carried to term (37 weeks+).
- Induction of labor and Cesarean delivery before 37 weeks gestation have become increasingly common for pregnant women at risk for adverse outcomes. These decisions "may be driven, in part, by the perception that late-preterm infants are at no greater risk for morbidity and mortality than are term infants."

Data Source: Tomashek KM, et al. "Differences in Mortality between Late-Preterm and Term Singleton Infants in the United States, 1995-2002" J Pediatr 2007; 151: 450-6.