

EMBARGOED UNTIL NOON MARCH 18, 2009

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PRETERM BIRTH RATE DROPS

March of Dimes Hopes It's the Start of a Long-Term Trend in Infant Health

WHITE PLAINS, N.Y., MARCH 18, 2009 -- The nation's preterm birth rate declined slightly in 2007 – a finding that the March of Dimes hopes will prove to be the start of a new trend in improved maternal and infant health.

The preterm birth rate declined for babies born at 34-36 weeks gestation (late preterm) and among babies born to African American and white women.

“We're encouraged by this drop in the preterm birth rate, and hope that the emphasis we've put on the problem of late preterm birth is beginning to make a difference,” said Jennifer L. Howse, Ph.D., president of the March of Dimes. “Through our Prematurity Campaign, we can build on this success and begin to give more babies a healthy start in life.”

The rate of preterm births (less than 37 weeks gestation) dropped to 12.7 percent from 12.8 percent in 2006, a small but statistically significant decrease, according to preliminary birth data for 2007 released by the National Center for Health Statistics.

(Editor's note: A chart showing one-year change in state preterm birth rates is attached.)

The preterm birth rate has increased by 36 percent since the 1980s, and despite the decline in the 2007 preterm birth rate, the number of babies born too soon continues to top more than 540,000 each year.

Preterm birth is a serious health problem that costs the United States more than \$26 billion annually, according to the Institute of Medicine. It is the leading cause of newborn death and babies who survive an early birth often face the risk of lifetime health challenges, such as breathing problems, mental retardation and others. Even babies born just a few weeks too soon (34-36 weeks gestation, also known as late preterm birth) have higher rates of death and disability than full-term babies.

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March of Dimes/Preterm Birth Rate Drops

The March of Dimes has a four-point plan to help reduce the preterm birth rate in the United States, which calls for:

1. A voluntary review of all cesarean-section births and inductions of labor that occur before 39 weeks gestation, to ensure they meet established American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) guidelines regarding medical necessity of elective procedures.
2. Expanded federal support for prematurity-related research to uncover the causes of premature birth, strategies for prevention, and improved care and outcomes for preterm infants.
3. Policymakers to improve access to health coverage for women of childbearing age and to support smoking cessation programs as part of maternity care.
4. Businesses to create workplaces that support maternal and infant health, such as providing private areas to pump breast milk, access to flextime, and information about how to have a healthy pregnancy and childbirth.

The March of Dimes is the leading nonprofit organization for pregnancy and baby health. With chapters nationwide and its premier event, March for Babies[®], the March of Dimes works to improve the health of babies by preventing birth defects, premature birth and infant mortality. For the latest resources and information, visit marchofdimes.com or nacersano.org. For detailed national, state, and county perinatal data, visit marchofdimes.com/peristats