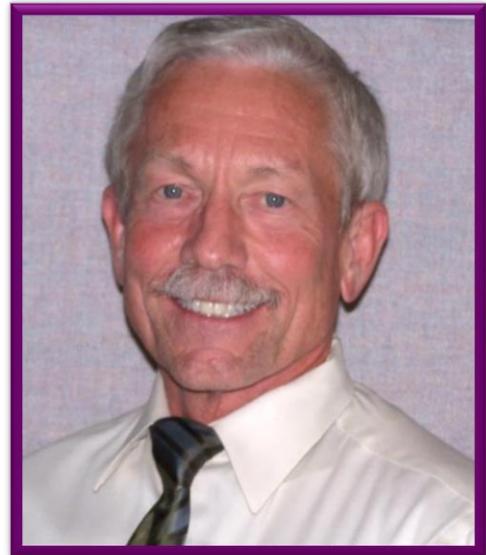


To *Your* HEALTH *Fresno County*

Bringing you public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health



Infant Mortality – A Public Health Crisis

October 6, 2014

In Fresno County in 2012, 93 infants died before their first birthday. The death of an infant is a human tragedy. These deaths also have negative long-term economic and societal implications. Infant mortality is not only a health problem; it is a social problem with health consequences.

Infant mortality is defined as the death of an infant before his or her first birthday, and is one of the most important indicators of population health.¹ The infant mortality rate (IMR) is measured by the number of infants who die in their first year for every 1,000 live births. This rate is associated with a variety of factors that are not only health-related, but psychosocial, environmental, educational, and economic in nature. Infant mortality is a reflection of the overall health of a community. The United States reached an all-time low infant mortality rate of 6.1 / 1000 live births in 2010², however, according to a 2011 World Bank report, the U.S. ranked 46th in infant mortality.³

In 2011, the three leading causes of infant mortality in the U.S and California were birth defects, premature birth, and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).⁴

About one in 33 babies is born with a birth defect, and birth defects lead as a cause of infant death. Not all birth defects are preventable, but a woman can significantly reduce risks and increase her chances of having a healthy baby by engaging in positive health behaviors. These include taking a folic acid supplement and avoiding tobacco, drug or alcohol use.⁵

Premature birth is the second leading cause of infant death. Babies born before 37 weeks gestation have a greater chance of being born at a low or very low birth weight, may have more lifelong health problems, and require longer hospital stays compared to babies born later.⁶ Children who are born prematurely have higher rates of cerebral palsy, sensory deficits, learning disabilities and respiratory illnesses compared with children born at term.⁷ According to a study by the Institute of Medicine, preterm birth is a serious health problem that costs the U.S. more than \$26 billion every year.⁸

SIDS is the third leading cause of infant death, and it is the leading cause of death for infants aged 1 month to 12 months. SIDS is defined as the death of an infant less than 1 year of age that occurs suddenly and unexpectedly. While SIDS is not entirely preventable, a baby's risk can be reduced with safe sleep practices, which include placing an infant on his/her back for every sleep, room sharing **without** bed sharing, and using a firm sleeping surface. Risk is also reduced by keeping soft objects away from infants, avoiding overheating, and avoiding exposure to second hand smoke.

Infant mortality in the U.S. impacts all racial and ethnic groups, but ethnic disparities are evident. Nationally, African American infants are twice as likely as non-Hispanic white infants to die before their first birthday.⁹ Alaskan natives and American Indians are 50% more likely to die during that first year.¹⁰ African American infants born in Fresno County are 2.5 times more likely to die during their first year of life due to complications of prematurity compared to non-Hispanic white infants.¹¹

Research provides no definitive evidence regarding the underlying causes of this disparity in birth outcomes. Health disparities in preterm birth can derive from such risk factors as chronic stress, poor education, limited social support, poverty, and racism over the life course. On the other hand, protective factors including financial security, full access to health care, healthy relationships, educational opportunities, and safe neighborhoods can positively influence health over the life span.

"Life Course Perspective" conceptualizes birth outcomes as the end product of not only the nine months of pregnancy, but of the entire life course of the mother leading up to the pregnancy.¹² A woman's reproductive health begins early in life.¹² To the extent that we make improvements in the conditions in which women are born, grow, live and work, we can positively influence a woman's health as well as that of her children.

Preparation for a healthy baby starts long before pregnancy. A woman should be healthy before, during, and after pregnancy. The following are actions that can be taken to improve the chances of having a healthy, full term baby:

- See a doctor regularly, even before pregnancy. If pregnant, get early and continuous prenatal care;
- Eat healthy well-balanced meals and drink plenty of water;
- Exercise regularly;
- Avoid use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco and exposure to second hand smoke;
- Reduce stress and get plenty of rest;
- See a dentist regularly;
- Take a multivitamin with folic acid in it every day prior to, and during, a planned pregnancy;
- Most importantly, plan each pregnancy.

Health care providers can strive to reduce elective deliveries earlier than 39 weeks gestation, expand regionalization of perinatal services to provide more appropriate levels of neonatal care for high-risk infants, and expand access to inter-conception care.

The Fresno County Department of Public Health is committed to improving the health of the community beginning with the health of our women and infants through the several programs of Maternal Child and Adolescent Health (MCAH). Experienced public health nurses provide **free** home visitation and/or case management services for pregnant and parenting women. These programs include:

- Nurse Family Partnership (NFP)
- Black Infant Health (BIH)
- Comprehensive Case Management (CCM)

- High Risk Infant Follow-up (HRIF)
- Perinatal Early Intervention (PEI)
- Adolescent Family Life Program (AFLP)
- Child Health Care Linkages Program (CCHLP)

For you and your family, click on the link below to learn more about:

[Public Health Nursing Services](#)

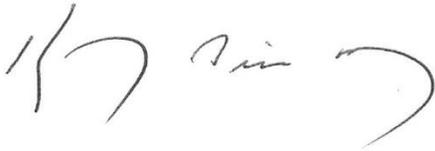
According to Dr. Paul Wise, a pediatrician and health policy analyst at Stanford, "The infant mortality rate in many ways is a synoptic judgment on our health-care system and our society. It's telling us that we must do better - and we can do better, especially when it comes to eliminating social disparities in medicine." ³

More information can be found at the following links:

- [Preconception Health](#)
- [Having a Healthy Pregnancy](#)

I would like to hear from you. Email me at ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us.

Here's to your health!



Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Interim Health Officer

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