Maternal and Child Health

Premature births

About 1 in 10 babies is born prematurely each year in the United States. A pregnancy typically lasts about 40 weeks, and babies are premature if they are born any time before 37 weeks of pregnancy. A developing baby goes through important growth during the final weeks and months of pregnancy. Many organ systems need the final weeks of pregnancy to fully develop.

Premature babies may have more health problems and often need to stay in the hospital neonatal intensive care unit before being able to go home. They also may have long-term health problems that can affect their whole lives. There is a higher risk of serious disability the earlier the baby is born, and premature birth is a leading cause of long-term developmental disabilities in children. Premature birth is also an important cause of infant deaths.

In 2014, nearly 8 of every one hundred babies born to Oregon mothers were born prematurely (Figure 1). The overall prematurity rate has decreased only 6% over the past 10 years, with that small decrease taking place in the moderately premature births (32-36 weeks of pregnancy), but no change taking place in the very premature births (less than 32 weeks of pregnancy).

![Figure 1: Premature births (<36 weeks) by year, Oregon](source: Oregon Birth Certificate Data)
The prevalence of premature births varies by race and ethnicity (Figure 2). In Oregon, as in much of the United States, non-Hispanic black women have higher rates of premature births than do non-Hispanic Asian, white, multiracial, or Hispanic women. Estimates of child premature birth rates for non-Hispanic Pacific Islanders and non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Natives should be interpreted with caution due to small sample sizes for these births.

Some of the factors that can increase risk of premature birth include having had a previous premature birth, smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes, poor nutrition, a space of less than 6 months between pregnancies, and some infections. Many women who have a premature birth have no known risk factors.

In Oregon, the Public Health Division’s programs to support preconception and interconception health include home visiting programs, education about nutrition and WIC services, smoking cessation activities, and others all can assist in moderation of risk factors linked to prematurity. The Public Health Division is partnering with Oregon Medicaid to determine whether pregnant women on Medicaid with a previous preterm birth are receiving an injectable medication
called 17P during prenatal care that can help to prevent preterm birth in the current pregnancy. We are also partnering with the Oregon Perinatal Collaborative and multiple hospital systems represented on the Collaborative to find new strategies for ensuring access to and use of 17P for these patients.

Additional Resources: Premature birth information from the CDC, and from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

About the Data: Oregon Birth Certificate Data from the Center for Health Statistics, Oregon Health Authority. Prematurity is a gestational age <37 weeks. Moderate prematurity is 32-36 weeks, and Very premature is <32 weeks. Rates of prematurity are calculated per 100 live births. Estimates of prematurity rates for specific subpopulations are unstable due to small numbers.

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