

# NEWBORN HEALTH

BREAST MILK PROTECTS AGAINST ILLNESS.



This fact sheet outlines basic facts about the health and well-being of newborn babies. This is also called **neonatal health**. There is a list of references at the end where you can find more information. Unless stated otherwise, all the statistics are worldwide.

## WHAT IS NEWBORN HEALTH?

The term newborn health refers to the health of babies during the first 28 days of life after birth. A child is at highest risk of dying during the first week of its life, particularly in the 24 hours following its birth. Of the three million newborn deaths that occurred worldwide in 2010, between one quarter and a half of these were in the first 24 hours. Three-quarters died during the first week of their lives.

## WHY DO WE ADDRESS NEWBORN HEALTH?

Reducing the number of babies who die during the first week of their lives is an essential part of the Millennium Development Goal to reduce child mortality (deaths of children under the age of five).

- Newborns now account for 44% of deaths of children under five.

- While newborn mortality rates have decreased from 32 to 22 deaths per 1,000 live births since 1990, they have decreased much more slowly than under-five mortality rates overall.
- Up to two-thirds of neonatal deaths are preventable.

## WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES OF NEWBORN DEATHS?

The main causes of newborn deaths are being born too soon (preterm birth), severe infections such as sepsis and a lack of oxygen at birth (asphyxia), as well as hypothermia.

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE NEWBORN HEALTH?

There are a number of things that can be done to help newborn babies survive. While care provided by a skilled health worker is the preferred aim, there are still things that mothers

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and their families can do themselves at home.

**Essential newborn care** is a set of recommended practices. It includes interventions to prevent and treat hypothermia and infection, and the promotion of breastfeeding.

- **Assessing the baby for any signs of danger.** Danger signs include feeding problems, reduced activity, difficulties with breathing, a fever, fits or convulsions, or the newborn feeling cold. Help should be sought from a health worker as soon as possible for a baby displaying any of these signs.
- **Skin-to-skin contact and kangaroo care.** Placing a newborn baby on the mother's abdomen or chest immediately after birth has been shown to have a number of benefits, including keeping the baby warm and helping to get breastfeeding underway. A cloth can be placed over the baby to keep it warm (thermal care). Kangaroo care involves the mother or father carrying the newborn baby, especially small or preterm babies, against their chest for extended periods of time.
- **Ensuring the baby stays warm enough (thermal care).** Babies can become dangerously cold immediately after being born as they have been in the womb where the temperature has been constant, so they have not learnt
- to regulate their body temperature. They can also lose heat very quickly. Newborns should be wiped dry with a clean, dry cloth immediately after birth, then wrapped once skin-to-skin contact ends. The baby should not be bathed for 24 hours after birth.
- **Cord and eye hygiene and care.** The umbilical cord should be cut with a sterile blade and tied with sterile/clean thread. This should be done by someone who is either wearing sterile gloves, or at the least has washed their hands with soap. Nothing should be placed on the stump. Eyes should be wiped with a clean, dry cloth.
- **Immediate breastfeeding.** If possible, breastfeeding should begin within the first hour after birth, with nothing else given to the baby before this. In some countries, it is a tradition to give a newborn a "pre-lacteal" feed before breastfeeding. This should be avoided. For example, in some societies honey is given as it is believed it will make a child speak sweetly. The first milk that is produced by a mother, colostrum, is highly nutritious and should not be expressed and discarded. Babies should be fed nothing but breast milk for the first six months of their life, not even water, as breast milk is usually enough.
- Exclusive breastfeeding.** There are a number of important reasons why mothers are advised to breastfeed their

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babies for six months, without giving them any other food or drink. Some of the main ones are:

- Breast milk contains the right balance of essential nutrients that babies need to help them grow, develop and thrive.
- Breast milk protects against illness because it helps transfer the mother's resistance to disease (antibodies) to her baby.
- Giving a baby under the age of six months old other foods or liquids can increase the risk of diarrhoea and other illnesses, as these substances may be contaminated. It can also slow down the production of breast milk as a baby taking in other food will suckle less.
- Babies need to be fed when they want to feed (on-demand), day and night, at least eight times during a 24-hour period to enable them to grow and develop.
- The more a baby breastfeeds, the more milk a mother produces so the baby has enough to satisfy its needs.

It is worth noting that it is very rare for a mother to be unable to breastfeed. However, if the baby is held in a bad position, or does not attach properly to the mother's nipple it can cause problems. Women often need advice and support to breastfeed successfully and exclusively.

If a baby is unable to breastfeed, then a mother needs to seek immediate help from a skilled health worker.



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## RESOURCES

This fact sheet is drawn from the sources below. If you want to find out more about the issues covered in this fact sheet, please refer to them. Or you can ask BBC Media Action's London-based health advisors. If you are working in a country where rates of HIV are high, this is an important factor to take into consideration when addressing newborn health issues and you should seek further advice.

## A GLOBAL REVIEW OF THE KEY INTERVENTIONS RELATED TO REPRODUCTIVE, MATERNAL, NEWBORN AND CHILD HEALTH

From the Partnership for Maternal, Newborn & Child Health:  
[http://www.who.int/pmnch/knowledge/publications/201112\\_essential\\_interventions/en/index1.html](http://www.who.int/pmnch/knowledge/publications/201112_essential_interventions/en/index1.html)

## FACTS FOR LIFE

UNICEF handbook with essential information around maternal health and childcare:  
<http://www.factsforlifeglobal.org/>

## UNITED NATIONS MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Facts on maternal health worldwide:

<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/childhealth.shtml>

Fact Sheet:

[http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Goal\\_4\\_fs.pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Goal_4_fs.pdf)

## WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION PUBLICATIONS AND FACT SHEETS ON NEWBORN HEALTH

[http://www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/topics/newborn/care\\_at\\_birth/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/topics/newborn/care_at_birth/en/index.html)

## WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION STATISTICS

[http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world\\_health\\_statistics/EN\\_WHS2013\\_Full.pdf](http://www.who.int/gho/publications/world_health_statistics/EN_WHS2013_Full.pdf)