

# Early Infant Death / Neonatal Death

When a baby dies in the first 28 days of life, it is called neonatal death. In the United States in 2006, about 19,000 babies died in their first month.

As parents attempt to cope with a loss, they may have many questions about what happened to their baby. The following may help parents discuss the loss of their baby with their healthcare providers.

## **WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON CAUSES OF NEONATAL DEATH?**

Premature birth (before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy) is the most common cause of neonatal death. Prematurity and its complications cause about 25 percent of neonatal deaths. The later a baby is born, the more likely he is to survive. Almost 30 percent of babies born at 23 weeks of pregnancy survive, while about 50 to 60 percent of babies born at 24 weeks, about 75 percent born at 25 weeks, and more than 90 percent born at 27 to 28 weeks, survive.

More than 12 percent of babies born in the United States each year are premature. The causes of premature birth are not thoroughly understood.

### ***Three groups of women are at greatest risk for premature birth:***

Women who have had a previous premature birth, are pregnant with twins, triplets or more or Women with certain uterine or cervical problems

## **WHAT HAPPENS AFTER A BABY DIES?**

Grieving parents can see or hold their baby after death. Some parents may find this comforting, but others may feel this is too upsetting. Parents should do what feels right to them.

Providers may ask if the parents want certain mementos of their baby, such as a lock of hair, footprints, photos, or a receiving blanket. Even if looking at these things around the time of death is painful, parents may eventually treasure these remembrances.

Hospital staff also may provide information on options for burial or memorial services.

## **The baby's doctors can tell parents what is known about the cause of the baby's death (if any). They may suggest:**

- An autopsy (internal examination after death). An autopsy reveals new information about why the baby died in more than one-third of all cases. Some parents are not comfortable with an autopsy and may choose not to have one.
- Xray of the placenta and umbilical cord.
- Genetic tests. Some of these tests also are done along with an autopsy. Parents whose baby had a birth defect should consider consulting a genetic counselor. These health professionals help families understand what is known about the causes of a birth defect and the chances that future babies could have the same birth defect.



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Premature babies, especially those born at less than 32 weeks of pregnancy and weighing less than 3 1/3 pounds, may develop serious complications that can sometimes cause neonatal death.

## **SOME OF THESE COMPLICATIONS INCLUDE:**

- **Respiratory distress syndrome (RDS):**  
Babies with RDS have immature lungs that lack a protein called surfactant that keeps small air sacs in the lungs from collapsing.
- **Intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH):**  
Premature babies sometimes develop bleeding in the brain.
- **Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC):**  
Some premature babies may develop this intestinal problem, a serious inflammation of the bowel.
- **Infections:**  
Premature babies have immature immune systems and sometimes develop serious infections, such as pneumonia (lung infection), sepsis (blood infection) and meningitis (infection of membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord).

## **WHICH BIRTH DEFECTS MOST COMMONLY CAUSE NEONATAL DEATH?**

Leading causes of birth defect-related neonatal death include:

- **Heart defects:**  
These are the most common birth defect-related causes of infant death
- **Lung defects:**  
A baby may be born with malformations or underdevelopment of one or both lungs. Many babies die due to complications that occur in immature lungs as a result of premature birth.
- **Chromosomal abnormalities:**  
Humans normally have 46 chromosomes. Sometimes a baby is born with too many or too few chromosomes.
- **Brain and central nervous system defects:**  
One example is anencephaly, in which most of the brain and skull are missing. Affected babies may be stillborn (the fetus dies before birth) or die in the first days of life. This birth defect often can be detected before birth with a blood test, ultrasound or amniocentesis.