

Teen births hit record low, CDC reports

11 February 2013, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter



Preterm and low-birth-weight babies also down, researchers add.

(HealthDay)—Teen birth rates have dropped yet again, reaching a historic low, and the number of babies being born early or with a low birth weight has also declined, a new U.S. government report shows.

Many factors may account for the improvement, experts say.

"We talk more about [teen pregnancy](#), the responsibility of having a child and how difficult it is to be a teen mom. We also talk about contraception and abstinence more," explained Dr. Jill Rabin, chief of ambulatory care, [obstetrics and gynecology](#) at Long Island Jewish Medical Center, in New Hyde Park, N.Y.

"Adults have to remember we're fighting the adolescent sex drive that developed as a matter of survival of the species," Rabin said. "It's important to remember the three I's when you're working with teens. They think they're immortal, invincible and infertile. We have to convince them otherwise and dispel the myths, and the message needs repetition."

As for the decrease in preterm and [low-birth-weight](#) babies, Rabin noted that "prenatal care is getting better, and the message of the importance of prenatal care is getting out there."

The report, from the National Center for Health

Statistics branch of the U.S. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), documented declines in the three areas: The [teen birth](#) rate fell to 31.3 births per 1,000 women aged 15 to 19 in 2011. Twenty years ago, that rate was 61.8 per 1,000 teenage girls. And, for the fifth straight year, the preterm birth rate dropped, to 11.7 percent in 2011 from 12.8 percent in 2006. The rate for low-birth-weight babies also declined, from 8.15 percent in 2010 to 8.1 percent in 2011.

The report was published online Feb. 11 and will appear in the March print issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

One expert noted that the three birth trends are often intertwined.

"Teen pregnancies are associated with preterm births. What really struck me from this report was that if the rate of teen birth hadn't gone down since 1991, 3.6 million more births would have occurred," said Dr. Ed McCabe, senior vice president and medical director of the March of Dimes.

"For two decades, the preterm birth rate rose steadily, but it's been decreasing since 2006, and is now the lowest it's been in a decade," he said. "It shows that preterm birth is not an intractable problem."

McCabe said a major reason for the decline in preterm birth is a focus on reducing elective cesarean section births and labor inductions. He said the March of Dimes and other groups, like the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, recommend that no elective birth procedures be done before 39 weeks of gestation unless there is a medical indication for early delivery.

"A lot of teen pregnancies are unplanned," McCabe said. "It's really about motivating teens to empower them to take control over their own bodies and lives."

The drop in [teen birth rates](#) was even more significant for some races, although the rates are still higher overall. In 1991, the rate of teen pregnancy among non-Hispanic blacks was 118.2 per 1,000 teens. By 2011, that number was down to 47.4 per 1,000 teens. In Hispanics, the 1991 rate was 104.6 per 1,000, and 49.4 per 1,000 teens in 2011.

Meanwhile, the rate of [preterm birth](#) is at its lowest point in five years at 11.7 percent. The biggest decline came in the birth of late preterm babies (those at 34 to 36 weeks gestation).

Like preterm births, the number of low-birth-weight babies has been declining since 2006. The latest rate of low-birth-weight babies (about 5.5 pounds or less) was 8.1 percent of babies born in 2011.

"Barriers to access to care are being reduced," Rabin said. "There are more and more programs to take care of the under- and uninsured. I think this will keep getting better."

Both Rabin and McCabe recommended getting care as soon as you know you're pregnant—although ideally, you should see your doctor before getting pregnant to make sure you're in the best health you can be and you can start taking prenatal vitamins.

More information: Learn more about premature birth and steps you can take to prevent it from the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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