



Stillbirth

Stillbirth Home

What is Stillbirth?

The loss of a baby due to stillbirth remains a sad reality for many families and takes a serious toll on families’ health and well-being. Learn more about stillbirth below.

A stillbirth is the death or loss of a baby before or during delivery. Both miscarriage and stillbirth describe pregnancy loss, but they differ according to when the loss occurs. In the United States, a miscarriage is usually defined as loss of a baby before the 20th week of pregnancy, and a stillbirth is loss of a baby at or after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

Stillbirth is further classified as either early, late, or term.

- An **early** stillbirth is a fetal death occurring between 20 and 27 completed weeks of pregnancy.
- A **late** stillbirth occurs between 28 and 36 completed pregnancy weeks.
- A **term** stillbirth occurs between 37 or more completed pregnancy weeks.

How Many Babies Are Stillborn?

Stillbirth affects about **1 in 175 births**, and each year about 21,000 babies are stillborn in the United States.¹ That is about the same as the number of babies that die during the first year of life. Because of advances in medical technology over the last 30 years, prenatal care (medical care during pregnancy) has improved, which has dramatically reduced the number of late and term stillbirths. However, the rate of early stillbirth has remained about the same over time.

What Increases the Risk of Stillbirth?

Stillbirth with an unknown cause is called “unexplained stillbirth.” The further along a woman is in her pregnancy the more likely it is that the stillbirth will be unexplained. Having an autopsy on the baby and other laboratory tests is important in trying to understand why the baby died before birth. Your health care provider can share more information about this.

Stillbirth occurs in families of all races, ethnicities, and income levels, and to women of all ages. However, stillbirth occurs more commonly among certain groups of people including women who:

- are of black race
- are 35 years of age or older
- are of low socioeconomic status
- smoke cigarettes during pregnancy
- have certain medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity
- have multiple pregnancies such as triplets or quadruplets
- have had a previous pregnancy loss

Stillbirth: A Healthcare Professional's Role

The loss of a baby due to stillbirth remains a sad reality for many families and takes a serious toll on the family's health and well-being. Learn how you can help.

Overview

What is stillbirth?

A stillbirth or fetal death is the death of a baby in utero before or during delivery. In the United States, a miscarriage usually refers to a loss before 20 weeks after a woman becomes pregnant, and stillbirth refers to a loss 20 or more weeks after a woman becomes pregnant.

How common is stillbirth?

Each year in the United States, approximately 21,000 babies are stillborn. Stillbirths occur almost 10 times more often than babies born with Down syndrome (DS).

What causes stillbirth?

The causes for most stillbirths are unknown. There are some cases where a woman might have one of these conditions:

- Stillbirths are genetic problems with the baby.
- Problems with the placenta and umbilical cord.
- Certain medical conditions in the mother, for example, uncontrolled diabetes, high blood pressure, or obesity.

How you can provide support

Helping parents understand as much as possible about what happened to their baby can be an important part of the grieving process. Talking with the family about the importance of the stillbirth evaluation can help them understand the importance of the stillbirth evaluation. Every family deserves the opportunity to discuss the specifics of their loss so as to help them decide what, if any, next steps need to be taken.

Consent and support

As sensitive family members are often devastated and overwhelmed following such a tragic and unexpected loss, healthcare providers should be sensitive to healthcare needs and understand the importance of an evaluation. The staff will allow the family to make an informed decision.

Explore possible next steps

Explaining the evaluation process as part of your next steps can help you provide careful support to families. In the U.S., it is important that only few families report having had a forensic evaluation. However, each family's unique grieving evaluation should always be respected.

Conducting a complete and careful evaluation is one of the most important steps to identify a cause for the stillbirth. Even when the cause was unknown, additional tests may provide information useful for counseling purposes. Many stillbirth evaluation protocols have been published, all of which include a careful medical history, a post-mortem autopsy, an examination of the placenta and genetic testing, typically a chromosomal microarray (CMA). Chromosomal analysis has helped many parents understand the genetic cause of stillbirth, but with unknowns in technology, chromosomal analysis on their own is currently the recommended genetic test because of its increased likelihood of producing a result, and the increased ability of a chromosomal microarray to identify genetic testing technology will continue to advance as future recommendations for genetic evaluation of stillbirths change.

Stillbirth: A Healthcare Professional's Role
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This does not mean that every individual of black race or older age is at higher risk for having a stillbirth. It simply means that overall as a group, more stillbirths occur among all mothers of black race or older age when compared to white mothers and mothers under 35 years of age. Some factors that might contribute to these stillbirth disparities include differences in maternal preconception health, socioeconomic status, access to quality health care, and stress.² More research is needed to determine what is underlying reason why some of these factors are associated with stillbirths.

Many of these factors are also associated with other poor pregnancy outcomes, such as [preterm birth](#).

What Can Be Done?

CDC works to learn more about who might have a stillbirth and why. CDC does this by tracking how often stillbirth occurs and researching what causes stillbirth and how to prevent it. Knowledge about the potential causes of stillbirth can be used to develop recommendations, policies, and services to help prevent stillbirth. While we continue to learn more about stillbirth, much work remains. To learn more about CDC's activities, visit the [Stillbirth CDC Activities page](#).

References

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