**Babies born at weekends 'more likely' to be stillborn or die in first week of life**

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Perinatal death rates in the first seven days after birth were highest on Thursday, followed by Saturday and Sunday

Babies born at the weekend are more likely to be stillborn or die in the first week of life compared to weekday deliveries, a major study into the “weekend effect” on NHS hospital performance has found.

Birth problems for both mothers and babies on Saturday and Sunday exceeded all others days in the week apart from Thursday, the day when most babies tend to be delivered, the most comprehensive study of its kind has shown.

Perinatal death rates in the first seven days after birth were highest on Thursday, followed by Saturday and Sunday, when fewer babies are delivered, while the lowest rate of perinatal death was on a Tuesday, the study found.

The average rate of perinatal death on weekdays was 6.4 per thousand babies, while the average rate across Saturday and Sunday was 7.3 per thousand, the study found.

The researchers estimated that if hospital performances were the same for the weekends as they are over the working week there would be about 770 fewer newborn deaths and 470 fewer maternal infections each year compared to the present.

Previous research on other treatments has found a weekend effect in the NHS with a greater risk of medical complications on Saturdays or Sundays compared to weekday treatment.

The latest study, published in the British Medical Journal, of 1.3 million births in England between April 2010 and March 2012 indicates a similar weekend effect in NHS obstetric wards.

Medical researchers from Imperial College London said they looked at other possible explanations such as gestational age, birth weight, maternal age and pre-existing health problems in the mothers such as diabetes, but still found a statistically significant weekend effect.

"In our [study] we tried to account for the fact that differences in rates of complications on different days may be due to chance, or that births on certain days are more complicated in some way. However, even after making these adjustments, we found the rates of complications vary on different days,” said Professor Paul Aylin of Imperial’s school of public health.

The study did not find any link with weekend staffing levels for hospital consultants, except for a slight increase in the risk of perineal tears, but did not look at staffing levels for other workers such as nurses or midwives.

“More work needs to be done to better understand the causes of these differences, so that steps can be taken to improve outcomes for mothers and babies. Maternity care involves a whole team including midwives and other medical staff, so one avenue for future research might be to look at staffing levels beyond consultants,” Professor Aylin said.