# Babies born at weekend are less likely to survive

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Babies born at the weekend are more likely to die within seven days than those born on weekdays, according to a new study.

There are 770 more baby deaths every year, and 470 more infections among new mothers, than would be expected if NHS performance were consistent across the week, experts said.

Babies born at weekends are also more likely to be readmitted to hospital as emergency cases a few days after they have been sent home, according to the findings, published in The BMJ.

Stillbirths or deaths within seven days were 7 per cent higher on weekends than weekdays, infections after childbirth were 6 per cent higher, and the chances of the baby suffering an injury during childbirth were also 6 per cent higher.

The paper will add to the continuing row over the “weekend effect”. Research suggesting worse outcomes for patients admitted to hospitals on weekends is frequently used by Jeremy Hunt, the health secretary, to justify his push for seven-day services.

A study in The BMJ in September showed that about 11,000 more people die every year within 30 days of admission to hospital on Friday, Saturday, Sunday or Monday compared with other days of the week.

Researchers behind that study said that a lack of consultant cover and “reduced” services could be contributing to higher death rates. They also argued, however, that it would be “rash and misleading” to conclude that an exact number of deaths could have been avoided.

The latest study looked at the “weekend effect” on outcomes for 1.3 million births in the English NHS between April 2010 and March 2012. The death rate was 7.3 per 1,000 babies delivered at weekends, compared with 6.4 per 1,000 on weekdays.

The researchers, from Imperial College London, said that their findings “were consistent with a lower standard of care for women admitted and babies born at weekends”.

Although they found no consistent link between outcomes and consultant levels on wards, Paul Aylin, one of the researchers, said that other elements of care they had not considered, such as nursing levels and quality and availability of diagnostic testing services, could play a role.

Andrew Whitelaw, emeritus professor of neonatal medicine at the University of Bristol, said that 96 per cent of elective caesarean sections were carried out on weekdays, which may have contributed to the outcomes because there is a very low risk of the baby dying in the first week.

David Richmond, president of the Royal College of Obstetricians & Gynaecologists, said: “Appropriate numbers of maternity staff underpin a safe and quality service and adequate ‘out-of-hours’ senior staffing remains a key issue in maternity care.”

World of difference

•A study in Scotland found that newborns were about 30 per cent more likely to die at weekends

•In Australia stillbirths and neonatal deaths were 17 per cent and 29 per cent higher respectively for babies born at weekends

•In Canada there was no higher risk to babies born at the weekend

•Research in the US looking at babies born at low weight found no link between what day a child was born and its risk of dying.

•A study of 28 hospitals found that the risk of dying within 30 days of admission was higher by 8 per cent in England, 13 per cent in the US and 20 per cent in the Netherlands.