

U.S. Living Longer, But More Infants Dying

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Infant Death Rates Caused by Low Birth Rate, Preterm Births

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Feb. 11, 2004 -- Americans are living longer than ever before -- mostly because homicides are down. But for the first time since 1958, infant death rates are up.

A new CDC report says that in 2002, the U.S. life expectancy reached a new high of 77.4 years, jumping from 77.2 in 2001 -- for both men and women, and for blacks and whites.

Among infants however death rates increased from 6.8 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2001 to 7.0 per 1,000 in 2002. The increase in death rates is in infants within the first week of life, or within the first 28 days of life.

"Factors such as low birth weight, preterm births, and multiple births all increase the risk of infant death," said Edward Sondik, director of the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

But there was some good news:

- Deaths from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) declined between 2001 and 2002, continuing a long-term downward trend.
- Fewer late-term fetal deaths occurred. These are births defined as 28 or more weeks of gestation.

Death rates for the total U.S. population decreased slightly in 2002:

- In 2001, there were 855 deaths per 100,000 people; in 2002, there were 847 deaths per 100,000.

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- Death rates declined in most racial, ethnic, and gender groups. Only deaths among American Indians (both males and females) and non-Hispanic white females were unchanged from 2001.
- Death rates from heart disease and stroke, the nations leading cause of death, declined by 3% each.
- Deaths caused by accidents and unintentional injuries were down by 2%, and deaths from cancer dropped by 1%.
- Homicide rates declined by 17% -- the biggest decline among all of the leading causes of death. If deaths from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks are not included, the decrease was 3%, which still reflects a continuing downward trend in homicides that began in 1991.
- The number of HIV/AIDS related deaths has continued to decline, by 2% between 2001 and 2002. Since 1995, HIV deaths have decreased some 70%. However, HIV remains the fifth leading cause of death for people aged 25 to 44.
- Death rates increased for some leading causes of death: Alzheimer's deaths were up 6%, influenza and pneumonia deaths were up 3%, high blood pressure deaths were up 3%, and blood poisoning deaths were up 3%.

The new death rate report is based on more than 96% of state death certificates issued in 2002. CDC also collects annual data from birth records, which document recent trends in low birth weight, cesarean and induced deliveries, and preterm and multiple births -- all factors that can impact infant health.

SOURCE: CDC.