

Health Trends

Little Babies, Big Costs

(NAPSA)—Approximately one in eight babies is born prematurely in the United States and that number has been rising steadily. According to a recent study published in the *American Journal of Nursing*, premature babies can exceed, on average, \$200,000 in hospital costs during the first year of life.

These rising costs are expected to become a bigger issue due to the increase in multiple births resulting from advances in assisted reproductive technologies. Also, because of advances in prenatal and neonatal care, more of the low-birth-weight infants born in the U.S. survive, increasing health care costs.

A Rising Public Health Concern

Prematurity is now the leading cause of death within the first month of life and second-leading cause of infant death. The rate of preterm births and low-birth-weight births has increased over the past decade. Most dramatic is the disparity in rates of premature births among different races and ethnicities due to poor socioeconomic conditions and lack of access to health care among low-income families. Given that 37.3 percent of the working poor are uninsured, restricting the availability of Medicaid is also expected to decrease access to prenatal care and drive up overall health care costs.

What Women Can Do

Prematurity risk is known to be responsive to early and frequent prenatal care, but often, those most at risk don't have access to adequate care. The increase in premature births and current discussion about cutting Medicaid has led the March of Dimes (MOD) to begin a five-year campaign to raise public awareness and address the problem.



There are ways to reduce the chances of having a premature or low-birth-weight baby.

MOD advises women of childbearing age to reduce some of their risk factors, including:

- Strive for optimal health.
- Take a multivitamin daily (folic acid is known to prevent birth defects if taken before and after conception).
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs.
- Achieve your ideal weight before getting pregnant.

MOD also advises pregnant women and those who know them to understand the signs and symptoms of preterm labor and know what to do if symptoms appear. Those symptoms include:

- Contractions every 10 minutes or more.
- Pelvic pressure.
- Low, dull backache.
- Cramps similar to your period.
- Abdominal cramps with or without diarrhea.

For more information, visit the March of Dimes Web site at www.marchofdimes.com. For a copy of the *American Journal of Nursing* study, visit http://www.nursingcenter.com/library/JournalArticle.asp?Article_ID=591301.