

Factsheet on preterm birth in Malawi

What is preterm birth?

A preterm birth is when a baby is born alive but before 37 weeks of pregnancy are completed.¹ In Malawi, one in three newborn deaths are due to preterm birth complications.^{2,a} Babies born too soon are between 6 and 26 times more likely to die during the first four weeks of their lives than babies born at term.³

In addition, preterm survivors often suffer from lifelong disabilities, such as visual and hearing impairments, chronic lung disease, long term cardiovascular ill-health, learning and behavioural impairments.¹ Prematurity has a far-reaching impact on their development and on their health as children and adults.

Preterm birth is a public health problem in Malawi

Malawi is the country with the highest preterm birth rate in the world.⁴ 18 babies are born too soon for every 100 babies born alive.⁴ Prematurity is the leading cause of death for babies in the first month of life in Malawi.² Every year 109,300 babies are born before 37 weeks of pregnancy are completed in Malawi.^{4,5,b} Of these babies, 4,300 die every year.^{2,c}



What can be done in Malawi?

Many of these deaths could be prevented, through both prevention of preterm birth, and care for the premature baby.

- ⓐ Adolescent pregnancy, older age pregnancy, short time gaps between births, chronic and infectious diseases, and unhealthy pre-pregnancy weight increase the risk of preterm birth¹
- ⓐ Family planning strategies, including birth spacing and adolescent-friendly services, can reduce the risk of preterm birth¹
- ⓐ Encourage early initiation and exclusive breastfeeding¹
- ⓐ Quality antenatal and postnatal care, along with skilled care at delivery, can help to reduce deaths due to preterm birth. Investing in trained and equipped health workers is key, with a focus on the 48 hours surrounding birth¹
- ⓐ Newborn resuscitation, antibiotics, hygienic cord care, breastfeeding, and mother to newborn skin-to-skin contact are all simple and effective interventions for saving small and sick babies¹
- ⓐ If given within the context of high quality care, an injection of antenatal corticosteroids (ACS) to pregnant women at risk of preterm delivery can help the babies' lungs rapidly develop and improve chances of newborn survival⁸

In 2014 Malawi committed to the Every Newborn Action Plan.⁸ This strategy sets out the priority solutions, and calls for a united effort to dramatically maternal and newborn deaths, and preventable stillbirths.

We must prioritise the evidence-based, cost-effective and feasible solutions in all health facilities that provide pregnancy and delivery services, as well as ensure better data collection on pregnancy outcomes to enable responsive action where it is most needed.

We must respect, protect, and count preterm babies! Learn about preterm birth and take action!



Prematurity in Malawi

Number of newborn deaths in the first month of life (2013)⁶	14,000
Mortality rate in the first month of life (per 1000 babies born alive) (2013) ⁶	23/1000
Preterm birth rate (% of babies born alive) (2010)⁴	18.1%
Country rank for preterm birth rate (2010) ⁴	1
Number of babies born preterm (2013)^{4,5,b}	109,300
Country rank for number of babies born preterm (2013) ^{4,5,b}	28
Number of deaths due to preterm birth complications (2013)^{2,c}	4,300
Share of newborn deaths caused by preterm birth complications (2013) ^{2,a}	31%
Women initiating breastfeeding within 1 hour of birth (2014)⁷	75%
Demand for family planning satisfied (2014) ⁷	75%
Antenatal care of four or more visits (2014)⁷	45%
Skilled attendant at delivery (2014) ⁷	87%
Mothers and newborns who received postnatal care within two days of birth (2014)⁷	72%
Exclusive breastfeeding for infants less than six months (2014) ⁷	70%

References:

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Notes:

- a. In Malawi, the estimated number of newborn deaths for 2013 is 14,027 and the estimated number of deaths due to preterm birth complications is 4,305.² These estimations were used to calculate the proportion of newborn deaths due to preterm birth complications: $(4,305/14,027) \times 100 = 31\%$ (1 in 3).
- b. In Malawi, the estimated number of live births for 2013 is 604,700⁵ and the preterm birth rate for 2010 is 18.06715%⁴. The 2010 preterm birth rate is applied to the 2013 live birth estimate: $(18.06715/100) \times 604,700 = 109,252$ (rounded to 109,300). Countries are ranked by number of preterm births based on these estimates for 2013.
- c. This is the estimated number of deaths due to preterm birth complications in the first 28 days of life (rounded from 4,305²). If including those who die from preterm birth complications between 0 and 5 years the figure is 4,800 (estimate provided by Save the Children).