

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 (2015 estimate).² 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,a} 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.² In 2015, an estimated 113,700 babies were born before 37 weeks of pregnancy were completed in Malawi.⁵ In the same year, an estimated 5,300 children under five years of age died from preterm birth complications.⁵

What can be done in Malawi?

Many of these deaths could be prevented, through prevention of preterm birth as well as 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
- Ⓒ In August 2015, the World Health Organization (WHO) published new recommendations to improve the survival and health of babies born too soon.⁶ Decision-makers should review and revise national clinical guidelines and essential medicines lists; promote the new recommendations widely; strengthen the skills of health workers to deliver the interventions; support health workers to accurately assess gestational age; and monitor adherence to the guidelines.⁶

In 2014 Malawi committed to the Every Newborn Action Plan.⁷ This strategy sets out the priority solutions, and calls for a united effort to dramatically reduce 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. Now is the time to scale up quality care to all women and newborns for them to survive, thrive and transform society.

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 (2015)⁸	13,700
Mortality rate in the first month of life (per 1000 babies born alive) (2015) ⁸	22/1000
Country rank for preterm birth rate (2015) ⁴	1
Number of babies born preterm (2015)⁵	113,700
Number of under-five deaths due to preterm birth complications (2015)⁵	5,300
Women initiating breastfeeding within 1 hour of birth (2014)⁹	75%
Demand for family planning satisfied (2014) ⁹	75%
Antenatal care of four or more visits (2014)⁹	45%
Skilled attendant at delivery (2014) ⁹	87%
Mothers and newborns who received postnatal care within two days of birth (2014)⁹	72%
Proportion of babies 0-5 months who are exclusively breastfed (2014) ⁹	70%

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Notes:

- a. Malawi ranks 1st (of 185 countries) globally for highest preterm birth rates (<37 weeks) for 2015.

This factsheet was produced in November 2014 and updated in July 2015 with Countdown. It was updated in November 2016.