



THE FAMILY TREE

Here's to Healthy Babies!

Babies are such a wonder! What can make us smile so easily? Or provoke our most tender feelings? Or make us so fiercely protective? And nothing brings us more joy than to know that our baby is healthy and developing well, with every chance for normal growth. We want our babies to have the best in life and to start out life with the greatest advantage. Unfortunately many of the infants born in the United States, and in Maryland specifically, do not begin their lives with an advantage. Along with our desire to have every child grow healthy, happy and free from abuse and neglect, **The Family Tree** is concerned for and actively involved in helping to decrease infant mortality and the numbers of babies born with low birth weight.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, based in Baltimore, recently released its results on a study done to measure child well-being between 1990 and 1998 (see chart). According to the annual Kids Count survey Maryland is not doing well in two of the eight indicators used -- rates of infant mortality and low birth weights.

In 1998, Maryland had a higher percentage of low birth-weight babies than all but eight other states, nearly the same ranking it held at the beginning of the decade. During that eight-year span, the percentage of Maryland babies born underweight climbed to 8.7 percent from 7.8 percent. Infants weighing less than 5.5 pounds at birth are at greater risk for developmental problems.

The state's infant mortality rate was 8.6 per 1,000 in 1998, down from 9.5 per 1,000 in 1990. Nationally however, 7.2 of every 1,000 children die in their first year. Forty states had better infant-mortality rates than Maryland in 1998, compared with 30 states in 1990.

These findings suggest that although Maryland did fare better in the other six indicators used to measure child well-being, our families must work harder at ensuring safe and healthy babies.

Reducing low birth rates

The incidence of low birth weight babies, which are newborns less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces, increased slightly from 7.5 percent in 1996 to 7.6 percent in 1998, the highest level in more than two decades. Behavior during pregnancy that can result in low birth

weight babies, includes lack of prenatal care, smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, inadequate weight gain during pregnancy and repeat pregnancy in six months or less. Infants of teenage mothers are often low birth weight and die at disproportionately high rates. More babies nationwide are being born dangerously small because of an increase in fertility treatments that has led to more twins and triplets and to older women giving birth.

The following are a few points to keep in mind should you become pregnant that will assist in reducing low birth rates:

- Seek early and continuing prenatal care
- If you're not already taking folic acid tablets, speak to your doctor; research shows you would be wise to start now
- Try to stop smoking. If you really can't stop, it's worth cutting down.
- Especially during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, women should try to stop drinking alcohol completely.
- Avoid over-the-counter medications if you can, and both conventional and complementary remedies. If you are having any kind of medical treatment, tell your doctor or therapist that you are expecting a baby.
- If you practice any strenuous sports too, think about stopping for a while. You may prefer to take things easy for the first 12 weeks.