



NCHS Data on Birth Defects

About NCHS

The CDC's National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) is the nation's principal health statistics agency, providing data to identify and address health issues. NCHS compiles statistical information to help guide public health and health policy decisions.

Collaborating with other public and private health partners, NCHS employs a variety of data collection mechanisms to obtain accurate information from multiple sources. This process provides multiple perspectives to help us understand the population's health, influences on health, and health outcomes.

Birth Defects

A birth defect is a structural or genetic abnormality present at birth that can adversely affect health and development. Several thousand different birth defects have been identified. Birth defects are the leading cause of death in the first year of life.

Based on data from state and local surveillance systems, an estimated 3 percent of U.S. infants are born each year with at least one serious birth defect. Applying that approximation nationally yields an annual estimate of 120,000 infants born with serious birth defects. Although U.S. birth certificate data underestimate the true prevalence of birth defects, they can be used to estimate trends. Between 1995 and 2000, the prevalence of neural tube defects reported on birth certificates declined approximately 20 percent, coincident with the fortification of processed cereals with folic acid starting in 1998. Over the same period, the prevalence of other common major defects such as heart malformations and facial clefts demonstrated much more modest decreases or remained stable.

Key Findings

Mortality

- In 2000, birth defects were reported as the underlying cause of death for 10,578 people.
- Birth defects are the leading cause of infant death (death in the first year of life). In 2000, over one-half of all birth defect deaths occurred during infancy (5,743), accounting for 20 percent of all infant deaths.
- Between 1995 and 2000, infant mortality attributed to birth defects declined 16 percent, compared to a 7 percent decline for infant deaths not attributed to birth defects.
- Trends in birth defect-associated mortality may reflect improvements in medical care, changes in the underlying prevalence, or changes in the reporting of deaths attributed to birth defects.

Health care utilization

- In 1999–2000, among children less than 5 years old, 12 percent of all re-hospitalizations after birth, almost 200,000 per year, were to children with a reported birth defect.
- Excluding newborn stays, children less than 5 years of age with a reported birth defect had an average length of hospitalization of 9 days, compared to about 4 days for children without reported birth defects.

Birth Defects Data Sources

NCHS employs a variety of data collection mechanisms to obtain accurate information from multiple sources. They include:

- **National Vital Statistics System** – collects information from birth and death certificates in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Birth certificates prompt physicians to report birth defects, and death certificates establish the cause of death. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss.htm>
- **National Hospital Discharge Survey** - is a national probability survey designed to meet the need for information on characteristics of inpatients discharged from non-Federal short-stay hospitals in the United States. From this survey, we can learn about hospitalizations and treatment of birth defects. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/about/major/hdasd/nhds.htm>

For further information about NCHS and its programs, visit us at <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs>, or call the Office of Planning, Budget and Legislation at 301-458-4100.