

What is stillbirth?

A stillbirth is the death of an unborn baby that has been in the mother's womb for 20 weeks or more. Stillbirth is a term that describes when a baby dies, and is not a cause of death. Stillbirth cuts across all socio-economic classes, races, religions, body types and maternal age groups. No woman is immune.

How often does stillbirth happen?

While stillbirth rates have decreased by more than 50 percent since the 1970's, there are still more than 25,000 babies stillborn in the U.S. each year . . . *that equals 70 babies each and every day.*

- One in every 150 pregnancies ends in stillbirth
- More than 50 percent of stillbirths happen in the third trimester and appear be otherwise healthy babies
- Fifteen percent of stillbirth deaths happen during labor and delivery
- Many full-term stillbirths occur in otherwise healthy, low-risk pregnancies

What increases my risk of having a stillbirth?

Research has identified several risk factors that may lead to a stillbirth:

- Mothers over 35 years of age
- Mothers who are obese prior to getting pregnant
- Babies who are very small or very big for gestational age
- Previous low birth weight delivery, SIDS or stillbirth
- Maternal smoking, diabetes and hypertension
- African American mothers (2-3 times greater risk)
- African American mothers over 35 years of age (4-5 times greater risk)

What are some common causes of stillbirth?

Stillbirth can be caused by problems with the mother, baby, placenta or umbilical cord. In stillbirths where a cause was identified by an autopsy, some common causes include:

- Problems with the placenta
- Infections of the mother, baby or placenta
- Cord accidents or problems
- Birth defects or abnormal chromosomes
- Fetal growth restriction (baby not growing normally)

It is important to note that nearly two-thirds of all stillbirth deaths remain unexplained. Experts warn that this is most likely due to the fact that in many hospitals, autopsies are not required by law.

What can I do to protect my unborn baby?

At this time, there is no way to predict or prevent all stillbirths. But there are many things that pregnant mothers can do to reduce the risk of stillbirth.

- Good prenatal care is important! Start seeing a doctor as soon as you think you might be pregnant. Keep all appointments and follow your doctor's advice.
- Do not smoke, drink alcohol or use drugs (unless your doctor prescribes them)
- If you have diabetes or high blood pressure, work closely with your doctor to keep it under control.
- Call your doctor right away if you have any vaginal bleeding, leakage or sharp pain
- During your last trimester, perform a 'kick count' at the same time every day when your baby is most active (see Kicks Count! below)
- If you are past your due date, talk with your doctor. Pregnancies longer than 42 weeks may be at greater risk for stillbirth.
- If you are concerned at anytime during your pregnancy, consider getting a second or third opinion.

What about counting my baby's kicks?

Your baby moves many times a day. Your baby's kicks are the best sign of his or her health. Thanks to ongoing research, kick counting is now being recognized as the first proactive strategy to help reduce your baby's risk of stillbirth.

Starting at week 28 (earlier for high-risk pregnancies) set aside time each day to count and keep track of your baby's movements (kicks, twists, turns, swishes or rolls). This will help you know what the "normal" pattern for your baby is, so you can more easily notice any changes in the pattern of your baby's movements. Experts agree that a change (increase or decrease) in your baby's normal kicking pattern may be a signal that there is a problem.

- Pick a quiet time in your day when your baby is usually most active.
- Sit with your feet up or lie on your side and start counting your baby's movements until you reach 10 – it will take most moms less than 15 minutes to count kicks in this way.
- Use a kick count chart to note the length of time it takes to feel 10 kicks.
- If you notice a sudden change (increase or decrease) in your baby's kicks, or you do not feel 10 kicks within two hours, call your doctor immediately.
- If you continue to be concerned do not hesitate to go to the ER/maternity ward or seek a second opinion.

Please refer to your First Candle Kicks Count! Guide or visit www.firstcandle.org/kickscount for more information on kick counting, what to do if you are concerned and/or to download a Kicks Count! Chart.

Is stillbirth hereditary?

There is no evidence to reflect that stillbirth is hereditary. However, because 1 in 150 babies are stillborn, women within the same extended family may experience a stillbirth. It is important to note that these related women's stillbirths may have no connect whatsoever.

What are the chances of a woman who has had one stillbirth to have another with her subsequent pregnancies?

Although all pregnancies can be considered a possibility for stillbirth to occur, 98% of all pregnancies result in the live birth of a healthy baby.

What if my baby is stillborn?

- Autopsies on *all* stillborn babies are important in order to help us understand and prevent as many deaths as possible. Autopsies can provide a cause of death in 40-70 percent of all stillbirth deaths.
- An examination of the placenta can also provide information about the possible cause of death. An autopsy and placental exam may provide answers to you about why your baby died.
- Knowing the cause of death can help you understand that there was nothing you could have done differently that would have prevented your baby's death. Finding a cause of death is also important for parents who would like to have another baby.

How is a stillbirth baby delivered?

Most mothers that experience a stillbirth death will deliver their baby vaginally, but C-sections are not uncommon. The health and well being of the mother, such as pain control options and supportive family members and birth assistants can help ease the overwhelming emotional and physical pain of stillbirth.

Will parents get to spend time with their stillborn baby?

It is encouraged that the parents and other family members spend some personal time together to hold the baby and say hello before saying goodbye. Many photographers offer their services to take photos that can be treasured in the years to come. Make decisions on what is best for you and any cultural beliefs you may have.

Should an autopsy be performed on a stillborn baby?

Medically speaking, autopsies on all stillborn babies are critical in order to obtain more definitive and comprehensive answers – and ultimately prevent as many stillbirth deaths as possible. Finding a cause of death through autopsy is also important for those parents that may consider another pregnancy.

Should parents have a funeral service for a stillborn baby?

Most states require that parents take responsibility for their child's remains, whether that be by burial or by cremation. Having a funeral or memorial service for a stillborn baby helps many families say goodbye and brings closure that will help with the healing process.

What should people say to a family who has had a stillborn?

Immediately following the stillbirth of their baby, families are often in a very intense grieving period. Everybody grieves differently, so remember to be patient. Saying things such as, "I'm so sorry," or "I can't imagine what you're going through but I promise to be here for you whenever you might need me," will let the family know that you care and that they can depend on you. However, statements like, "You can have another baby," or "It was God's will," may upset the parents during an already extremely difficult time.

Where can families find support?

First Candle provides a 24 hour a day, seven days a week crisis hotline for all those affected by the death of a baby at 1.800.221.7437. Bilingual crisis counselors are on hand and referrals to local resources can be made. Our web site also provides resources for grieving families, as well as memorial opportunities at www.firstcandle.org. Other resources include:

- International Stillbirth Alliance, www.stillbirthalliance.org
- MISS Foundation, www.missfoundation.org
- National Stillbirth Society, www.stillnomore.org