



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



MEDIA STATEMENT

To: Editors & Health Journalists
Issued by: Department of Health
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World Prematurity Awareness Month - November

Pretoria: The Department of Health urges all pregnant women to access antenatal as early as possible and to follow a healthy lifestyle including avoiding smoking, drinking alcohol or using illegal drugs during pregnancy. This will reduce the risk of preterm labour and premature birth, which is the leading cause of death in children under the age of five.

About 15 million or 1 in 10 children babies globally are born preterm each year. In South Africa, an average of 15% or 1 in 7 babies of all births are born prematurely annually. Approximately 84 000 preterm infants are born in South Africa each year and 10% of them premature infants are at increased risk of death and various other complications including respiratory, neurological and eye morbidities compared with full-term infants.

Preterm is defined as babies born alive before 37 weeks of pregnancy are completed. There are sub-categories of preterm birth, based on gestational age, and these include extremely preterm (less than 28 weeks) very preterm (28 to less than 32 weeks).

It is recommended that pregnant women should to attend all antenatal care visits or appointments throughout their pregnancy periods to enable the health professionals monitor and assess the state of health of both the mother and unborn child in order to identify early signs and symptoms of manageable and life-threatening complications such as pre-eclampsia, urinary tract infections and gestational diabetes.

South Africa ranks 24th out of 184 countries with high number of newborn deaths around the world due to complications from preterm birth. The department in collaboration with various stakeholders in the sector, has developed strategies, programmes and other interventions to effectively manage complications and prevent avoidable deaths linked to prematurity in the country as part of broader under-five child mortality prevention plan.

These include award-winning MomConnect – a cellphone-based technology with over 4.5 million subscribers, developed to create a platform to support pregnant women with health promotion messages translated into official languages to improve their health and that of their infants. The other intervention is an Early Childhood Development radio campaign called Side-by-Side which reaches about 5.7 million audience weekly through 11 SABC African language radio stations and social media platforms. The implementation of recommendations as outlined in the Saving Mothers

and Babies Reports, include guidance on management of conditions such as hypertensive disorders of pregnancy and infections, as well as management of preterm delivery for the mother-baby pair.

The country will continue to implement programmes and initiatives to protect children against vaccine preventable diseases including improvement of the Integrated Management of Childhood Illnesses (IMCI) services. In addition, the country made a declaration of exclusive breastfeeding for all mothers including those living with HIV to exclusively breastfeed their babies for six months and to continue breastfeeding for least 24 months.

Although the under-five mortality rate has declined from 74.7 per 1000 live births in 2002 to 30.7 per 1000 live births in 2022, and infant mortality from 55.2 per 1000 live births to in 2002 and 24.3, more still needs to be done to ensure that children reach their full potential in the country.

The department has also intensified sexual reproductive health to improve access to effective contraception methods (family planning) in an effort to reduce unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and reproductive health complications especially amongst girls and young women.

The department will tomorrow, in collaboration with various stakeholders in the health sector, host a hybrid event on World Prematurity Awareness as part on sustained efforts to end preventable preterm birth and help all families have full-term pregnancies and healthy babies.

Details of the hybrid commemorative event are as follows:

Date: Wednesday, 22 November 2023

Time: 14h00

Venue: The Lakes Hotel and Conference Center - Benoni

Link: https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_RtfD-VUvRF6ym-dkx5aWnQ

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