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Preterm babies: Interventions and care required

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By Dr G. Pramod

Globally, more than 1 in 10 babies are born prematurely ([gestational age < 37 weeks](#)), making it an estimated 15 million premature

births every year. India has the highest contribution in the world with around 3.5 million premature births every year. Prematurity is one of the most common causes of infant mortality.

The cause of prematurity is unknown in most cases, but multiple

factors like [maternal hypertension](#), infections, chronic maternal health conditions such as diabetes and foetal growth restrictions can lead to premature births. Artificial reproduction techniques like In-vitro fertilisation ([IVF](#)) and increase in multiple pregnancies have also led to increase in premature births. Premature babies need to be cared for in neonatal intensive care units ([NICU](#)) and even after leaving the hospital, they need regular follow up.

The neonatal survival has remarkably improved in last 20 years in India, especially under the ambitious [Indian Newborn Action Plan](#) (INAP) as part of National Health Mission ([NHM](#)). Neonatal mortality rate decreased from 38 per 1000 live births in 2000 to 21 per 1000 live births in 2020. Increased antenatal steroid cover for mothers in preterm labour and institutional deliveries has improved survival of premature infants. The INAP programme aims to reduce the incidence of preventable newborn deaths and stillbirths across the country to a 'single digit' by 2030. The programme has also helped to draw attention to neonatal care during policy creation. India has over 600 Special Newborn Care Units (SNCU) to provide Level II neonatal care. Programmes like Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakaram (JSSK), Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY), and other universal health insurance coverages provide access to quality medical care for mothers and Newborns.

Improvement in survival of premature infants, has led to increase in the need for expertise to address morbidities especially in developmental and growth in the infancy and childhood. The human brain develops and changes throughout life, but the most rapid brain growth happens in the last trimester of pregnancy and the first two years of life. The first 1000 days of life is crucial and can have a lasting impact on the growth and brain development of the baby. Malnutrition and undernutrition during this critical period can increase the chances of mortality or hamper the cognitive and behavioural growth of the child. It is essential to follow the premature infants at least till 3 years of age to identify and support the developmental concerns of motor, intellectual, vision and hearing, and to aid the growth with the required nutrients such as protein, zinc, vitamins, polyunsaturated fats, and iron. Providing the right nutrients in the right amount at the right time is one of the best ways to ensure overall health and growth for the baby. District Early Intervention Centres ([DEIC](#)) are also established by the Government of India (GoI) for the treatment of babies with developmental concerns.

Quality neonatal care is still expensive and may not be accessible

to all. Lack of skill and expertise in this area results in disparities in providing equitable and affordable care. Currently, National Health Mission (NHM) is working in partnership with the state governments to ensure access to skilled care for neonates. It is vital to adopt universal coverage of antenatal steroids for mothers in preterm labour or at risk of impending premature delivery and promote institutional deliveries which have NICUs equipped to handle such preterm. The cost for establishing and operationalising NICUs is mainly on infrastructure which can be decreased by developing local technology, devices, and solutions.

Strategies like non- invasive ventilation ([CPAP](#)), widespread surfactant availability, adopting kangaroo mother care (KMC) and focus on use of exclusive mother milk is effective in reducing infections and the length of hospital stay. Encouraging family participation through family centred care is essential in providing more holistic care which helps in better neurodevelopment of premature infants. There is need for more active Private – Public partnership in this critical and crucial space to achieve desired targets.

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