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## Looking out for newborns

*Taking care of children in the first few months of their life is crucial. The first 28 days are particularly critical as they lay the foundation for a child's overall well-being.*

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**By Shrimansi Kaushik**

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HYDERABAD: Focusing on newborn healthcare includes reducing premature baby and neonatal deaths. These are preventable and can be reduced with cost-effective solutions. CE speaks with doctors about some of these solutions

Taking care of children in the first few months of their life is crucial. The first 28 days are particularly critical as they lay the foundation for a child's overall well-being. Addressing issues in these first few days helps identify long-term health challenges. "In India, more than three million babies are born prematurely (before 37 weeks). Neonatal deaths (death of newborns in the first 28 days of life) contribute to 40% of all children dying below five years of age. Prematurity and its related complications contribute to more than 60% of neonatal deaths," said Dr Zakiulla Mohammed, DM(Neo), Consultant Neonatologist, Fernandez Hospital. He also specified that the reduction of prematurity and management of prematurity-related complications is part of Sustainable Developmental Goals.

Dr Zakiullah explained that despite an increase in institutional births ( 88% in 2019-20 from 78% in 2015 -16 as per the National Family Health Survey-5 and NFHS-4 respectively), the proportion of babies born prematurely has been the same over the last decade, approximately 13%, as per an article published in The Lancet 2023 issue. He also shared that as per the World Health Organisation (WHO), more than 75% of all prematurity-related deaths occurring in low and middle-income countries (LMIC) can be prevented by simple and cost-effective interventions.

Considering this, neonatal healthcare can be improved significantly, helping reduce the number of premature and neonatal deaths. “The WHO released some recommendations on antenatal care for a positive pregnancy experience in 2016 and care of preterm or low-birth-weight babies in 2022. Some of these cost-effective interventions include delayed cord clamping, immediate skin-to-skin contact, exclusive use of breast milk, Kangaroo Mother Care (KMC) and Family Centric Care,” Dr Zakiullah said.

Explaining KMC, he mentioned that it reduces neonatal deaths by 40% and that too in a cost-effective manner. It also reduces the risk of infections, and hypothermia, and promotes growth and exclusive breastfeeding rates in neonates at the time of discharge.

“Involvement of the family in routine neonatal care, counselling, and education, reduces maternal stress and helps in discharge preparation,” he said.

There is an immediate need to implement these strategies as positive results are coming forth. “There are largely five causes that account for nearly two-thirds of all (23 lakh) child deaths in India. Three of these causes account for 80% of the deaths in the first month of life, i.e. 10 lakh. These causes are prematurity and low birth weight, neonatal infections, birth asphyxia and birth trauma. Pneumonia and diarrhoea account for 50% of the 13 lakh deaths between 1-59 months,” said Dr A Hari Krishna, Consultant Children and Newborn Specialist, Renova Hospitals, Kompally.

According to him, all babies should receive thermal protection, which means promoting skin-to-skin contact between mother and infant, including KMC; hygienic umbilical cord and skin care; early and exclusive breastfeeding; assessment for signs of serious health problems or need of additional care (e.g. those that are low-birth-weight, sick or have an HIV-infected mother) and preventive treatment (e.g. immunisation BCG and Hepatitis B, Vitamin K and ocular prophylaxis).

He also advised the families taking care of newborns to seek prompt medical care if necessary. Danger signs include feeding problems, or if the newborn has reduced activity, is facing difficulty in breathing, has a fever, fits or convulsions, tracks jaundice in the first 24 hours after birth, has yellow palms and soles at any age, or if the baby feels cold). He also advised them to register the birth and bring the baby for timely vaccination according to national schedules.

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