

# Rate of premature births on the rise in high-stress cities

Zhang Qian

**S**even-month-old Cheng Jixiang, four months premature, is still hooked up to life-saving equipment but he's luckier than his twin sister who died two months ago.

He's now at home after receiving hyperbaric oxygen therapy and other treatment while in a hospital incubator. And there's feeding and medication. All of this costs thousands of yuan and surgery will come later when he is stronger, funded by a charity, Premature Baby Aid Fund.

Cheng was born with intestinal perforation, thyroid and other problems associated with insufficient development of organ systems.

Baby Cheng is an extreme case, but many premature babies face far more health problems than babies carried to full term. Premature babies are defined as those born after less than 37 weeks' gestation.

Worldwide, an estimated 13 million premature babies are born every year, around 10 percent of births, according to White Paper on Preterm Birth provided by the Department of Reproductive Health and Research of the World Health Organization. The rates vary widely among regions. Each year around 1 million babies die within the first month of life.

Rates are rising in many countries, including China.

The natural rate of premature delivery is around 7 percent but it has been increasing in recent years, especially in big cities such as Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou, Guangdong Province, says Ma Jianian, secretary general of the Premature Baby Aid Fund. The fund was first an association of parents and now provides lectures for parents and parents-to-be about premature babies and special care.

"Today the average rate of premature delivery in China is around 10 percent and it is expected to increase by 1 percentage point each year based on trends in recent years," says Ma. "Rates in Shanghai, Beijing and Guangzhou are above 10 percent."

Major factors contributing to premature births include high blood pressure, diabetes, genital tract infections, multiple births and pregnancies among older women (over 35 years), according to Dr Ying Hao, deputy chief of Obstetrics Department at Shanghai No. 1 Maternity and Child Health Hospital.

Drinking alcohol, smoking,



A nurse takes care of a premature baby. The average rate of premature delivery in China is around 10 percent.

inhaling second-hand smoke, working long hours, fatigue, stress, mood swings, lack of exercise and poor eating habits also increase risk. These are frequently part of big city living.

High-calorie, high-cholesterol and fatty foods contribute over time to high blood pressure and diabetes.

Even if diabetic women maintain good health during pregnancy, caesarean sections are usually recommended since the condition is aggravated in late pregnancy.

In addition, age is a factor in premature births when mothers are over 35 or under 20. Both the number of older mothers and young mothers are increasing. Improper induced abortions can cause reproductive system infections that can cause early uterine contractions.

Multiple births, common in vitro fertilization, carry a higher risk of premature births, according to Dr Qin Yan, associate chief physician of the Newborn Department of Shanghai No. 1 Maternity and Child Health Hospital.

A single baby is usually delivered naturally after 39 weeks of pregnancy, twins within 36 weeks and 33 weeks for triplets, says Dr Qin.

"Of course, we cannot control the natural rate of premature delivery, but we can reduce unnecessary risk by knowing the factors that may lead to premature delivery and take preventive measures," says Ma from the Premature Baby Aid Fund.

## Regular checks

SOME premature births can be prevented.

Before getting pregnant, women with diabetes, high blood pressure and other health conditions should check with their doctors. Early and regular pregnancy checks, once or twice a month, can identify problems, and medication and other measures can be prescribed.

All pregnant women should eat a balanced diet with plenty of protein, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Rest, minimal stress and a calm mood are important.

In cases of bleeding, women should see their doctor and get to a hospital in case of early labor.

Obviously, the belly should be protected and pressure on it should be minimized; women should avoid heavy lifting and standing, crouching and reaching high for long periods.

Pregnant women should watch

their step and avoid falls. They should check with their doctors about when to avoid sexual intercourse.

In premature babies, organ systems have not fully developed; the babies have lower immunity, often poor respiration and digestion and slower growth; in severe cases there may be cerebral palsy, epilepsy, developmental and behavior disorders.

However, many non-extreme cases do very well, and early pregnancy checks and intervention are important.

Parents should follow doctors' advice about care, special formula, massage and exercise.

Regular checkups, once every one or two months, are important for early diagnosis of possible problems and intervention, says Dr Qin Yan, associate chief physician of the Newborn Department of Shanghai No. 1 Maternity and Child Health Hospital. "This can greatly reduce the rate of cerebral palsy and vision problems — and early prevention is cost effective."

It only costs 100 yuan (US\$15) to 200 yuan to diagnose possible cerebral palsy within six months of birth, but later treatment is very expensive, says Ma Jianian, secretary general of the Premature Baby Aid Fund.

Ninety percent of these infants can recover well with timely treatment but it is important not to miss the treatment window.

Most big hospitals in Shanghai offer checks for premature babies. Since November, the Premature Baby Aid Fund has offered free checks for cerebral palsy and vision problems.

Premature babies can get free checkups at the Children's Hospital of Fudan University, as long as the parents provide a birth certificate and proof of residence.

## TCM on treating fever in children

Doris Rathgeber

MANY parents are fearful when their children's body temperature elevates. Fever is in most cases a response to infections, diseases or extreme (also emotional) conditions for the child. Treatments to reduce fever are diverse, so what is the best thing to do?

In Western medicine mostly, the primary purpose is to reduce the fever promptly. This is often done with the help of fever-lowering or anti-inflammatory medicine, a cooling fan or wet towels to take away the external heat.

Traditional Chinese medicine, however, believes that bringing down the fever directly won't help the patient in the long run and often increases the recovery time. Fever has a reason and always comes with accompanying symptoms that help identify the root cause.

Fever's root causes are divided into external causes (cold wind, hot wind, warm heat and damp heat) and internal damage, such as *yin* (cold energy) deficiency and *qi* (energy) and blood deficiency. According to the specific diagnosis, the TCM doctor prescribes a herbal remedy that not only stops the fever but also cures the cause as it eliminates wind, cold, heat and dampness, balances *yin* and *yang* (hot energy) and tonifies *qi* and blood.

Especially when dealing with children, it is important to note that children have different constitutions from adults. Their *qi* is weak, thus, their lung organ system is weak.

Furthermore, children's *yin* and *yang* are not mature; usually children have an excess of *yang*. As a result, they have a higher tendency to be hyperactive and heated. Furthermore, diseases progress fast in children; however, they also respond well to medication and recover more quickly than adults. In conclusion, children need more gentle medical techniques and lower doses of medication.

Chinese medicine recommends giving the body some time to cure itself. Covering the child in layers of blankets to reduce the temperature (by sweating) is one "home" treatment in China. Also, Tiger Balm and oils (like peppermint, lavender, eucalyptus or tea tree) can be beneficial. Some practitioners also advise rubbing downward on the child's spine to push down internal heat.

In general, it is always the best to visit a doctor (especially when the fever is already over 38.5 degrees Celsius and lasts longer than three days) in order not to endanger the child's health.

(Doris Rathgeber is the founder of Body & Soul Medical Clinics.)

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