Prematurity is a leading cause of infant mortality. Babies born preterm (before 37 weeks gestation) have lower birthweight, greater medical needs, and may experience long-term physical and developmental disabilities.

In 2005, the Institute of Medicine estimated that the annual societal cost of preterm birth in the United States was $26.2 billion, or $51,700 for each baby born prematurely\(^1\). This estimate includes medical care, early intervention services, special education services, and lost work-related productivity. In 2005, medical costs alone were estimated to be $32,325 for preterm babies, compared to $3,325 for term babies\(^2\).

In Wisconsin...

Among the 67,004 babies born in Wisconsin in 2015, 6,251 (9\%) were born prematurely\(^3\).

In addition to the suffering and stress experienced by families, these premature births resulted in approximately $181 million extra medical costs in Wisconsin in 2015. For the state Medicaid program, the extra medical costs were approximately $76 million\(^4\).

These estimates are based on 2005 costs. It is likely that the true cost to Wisconsin is even higher since costs have continued to rise in the past decade.

What do we know about preventing premature births?

Sometimes we don’t know why a baby is born premature. However, we know that we can reduce the risk of prematurity by providing good healthcare before, during, and between pregnancies, increasing the time between pregnancies, and reducing smoke exposure\(^1,5,6\). We also know that high levels of chronic stress increase the risk of prematurity\(^1\). Living in poverty or unsafe neighborhoods and experiencing racism all contribute to chronic stress. In our state, we know that African American women are more likely to experience these stresses\(^7\) and we also see the highest rates of premature birth among African American women\(^3\).

For babies to be born healthy and stay healthy, mothers and families need to have access to quality health care as well as neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities that promote health throughout their lifetimes.

Please visit lihf.wisc.edu to learn more.

4. Estimate based on March of Dimes (2) and Wisconsin Department of Health Services (3).