

More Premature Babies Surviving

Survival chances have greatly improved for premature babies, even those born extremely early

About 70% of babies born alive between 22 and 26 weeks gestation in Sweden now survive past the age of one, largely thanks to medical intervention. But the authors say their study in the Journal of the American Medical Association does not answer the bigger ethical question over intervention. Over half of the babies that survived experienced serious health problems. The researchers looked at all infants born before 27 weeks gestation in their country during 2004-2007. The overall perinatal mortality or death rate was 45%, meaning over half of the 1,011 babies born survived. Some babies died before they were born, and some during or immediately after birth. Of the 707 live-born infants, 70% were still alive at the end of the year-long observation period of the study, which is many more than have been previously reported in studies. Analysis revealed the risk of death around the time of birth and in the first year of life was increased in the most premature. Knowing when to intervene For example, only five (10%) out of 51 babies born at 22 weeks survived to a year and only one of these without any major illness. In comparison, 53% of those born at 23 weeks and 85% of those born at 26 weeks reached their first birthday, and up to half of them without serious illness. Medical interventions did appear to make a big difference to survival odds and probably explain why Sweden had such an impressive record. Babies born at hospitals with the best intensive care facilities and expertise and where active treatment was given - something common-place in Sweden - were far more likely to survive. And of the 104 deaths occurring at least 24 hours after admission to a neonatal intensive care unit, 42 (40%) involved a decision to withdraw intensive care due to anticipated poor long-term prognosis. The researchers say this suggests non-initiation or withdrawal of intensive care for extremely premature infants "cannot be based solely on a notion of unlikely survival." But they stress this is not to suggest that all extremely premature live-born infants should be kept alive at any cost.