PREGNANCY-RELATED MORTALITY

A pregnancy-related death is defined as a death which occurs during or within 1 year after the end of a pregnancy, from any cause related to or aggravated by the pregnancy or its management, but not from accidental or incidental causes such as injury. This definition includes more deaths than the traditional definition of maternal mortality, which counts pregnancy-related deaths only up to 42 days after the end of pregnancy. Although maternal mortality in the United States declined dramatically over the last century, this trend has reversed somewhat in the last several decades, and racial and ethnic disparities in both maternal and pregnancy-related mortality persist. In 2006-2007, the latest years for which data are available, a total of 1,294 deaths were found to be pregnancy-related (15.1 deaths per 100,000 live births). This represents a substantial increase from 1987 levels of 7.2 pregnancy-related deaths per 100,000 live births. However, the extent to which this increase may reflect improved identification and coding of pregnancy-related deaths is unclear. The pregnancy-related mortality ratio among Black women was approximately 3.2 times the rate for White women in 2006-2007 (34.8 versus 11.0 per 100,000), a disparity that has remained relatively constant. The pregnancy-related mortality ratio also increased with age. Women aged 35-39 years were more than twice as likely to die from pregnancy-related causes as women aged 20-24; for women older than 39 years, the risk increased five-fold (data not shown).

Some of the most common causes of pregnancy-related death in 2006-2007 were cardiovascular disease (13.5%), diseases of the heart muscle (cardiomyopathy, 12.6%), uncontrolled bleeding (hemorrhage, 11.9%), and non-cardiovascular medical conditions (11.8%). In 1987-1990, hemorrhage was the leading cause of pregnancy-related deaths (29%); hypertensive disorders of pregnancy, including preeclampsia and eclampsia, accounted for almost 18 percent of pregnancy-related deaths, compared to 11.1 percent in 2006-2007.

Pregnancy-Related Mortality Ratios, by Race, 2006–2007

Leading Causes of Pregnancy-Related Deaths,* 2006–2007

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*The cause of death was unknown for 5.6% of all pregnancy-related deaths.