Minority Infants More Likely to Receive Poor Care in NICUs

Study findings confirm that Black babies face inequality beginning at birth.

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In the United States, racial disparities exist in many medical settings. Now new findings published in the journal Pediatrics reveal that infants of color, particularly Black newborns, receive inadequate care in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) compared with white infants, reports HealthDay.

A review of 41 studies led researchers to conclude that Black preterm newborns were the most vulnerable in NICUs. Hospitals with high proportions of these babies often provided inferior care and were understaffed. In addition, mortality rates were much higher in hospitals in which most very low-birth-weight infants were Black, and Black and Hispanic parents of infants with very low birth weights received significantly fewer referrals for early intervention than those who were white.

What's more, compared with white infants, Black infants experienced a twofold greater risk of dying from bleeding inside or around the ventricles in the brain. These youngsters were also less likely to receive surfactant therapy, a lifesaving treatment for babies born with partially developed lungs.

Minority families also reported being less satisfied with their NICU experience. Black mothers felt that they didn't receive adequate education and support for breast feeding before and after giving birth, which may explain why these mothers were less likely to breast-feed after being discharged.

Additionally, Black mothers were more likely to be discouraged from having daily skin-to-skin contact with their infants, which is known to help encourage breast feeding.

According to Jochen Profit, MD, MPH, an associate professor of pediatrics at Stanford University and the senior researcher of the study, a lack of resources, understaffing at minority-serving hospitals, language barriers and misunderstandings about families' situations are part of the problem.

"Researchers are now looking at chronic stress caused by societal, institutional or interpersonal racism as causal factors for preterm birth, and this review suggests that these factors are also

casual factors for racial/ethnic disparities in NICU quality of care," wrote study authors. "Targeted quality improvement efforts hold promise for improving racial/ethnic equity in care delivery."

Profit encourages women to ask questions during their pregnancy about where they will be giving birth. Women can also inquire whether hospitals where their babies will be delivered has ever participated in quality improvement efforts.

For similar coverage, read "African-American Infants More Likely to Suffer Cardiac Arrest" and "Minorities Likelier to Get More Low-Value Health Services."

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