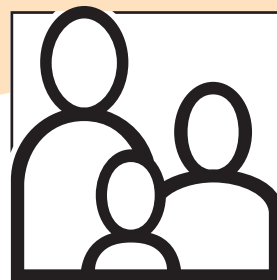


UNICEF/01-4929/Press

**Why it is important to share  
and act on information  
about**



# Timing Births

Too many births, births too close together, and births to adolescent girls or women over the age of 35 endanger women's lives and account for approximately one third of all infant deaths.

Family planning is one of the most powerful ways of improving the health of women and children. Over 100 million women in developing countries who are married or living with men report that their needs for contraception remain unmet. Access to family planning services for everyone, including adolescents, particularly in countries where marriage occurs early in life, together with universal access to education, would help prevent many maternal and child deaths and disabilities.



# Key Messages:

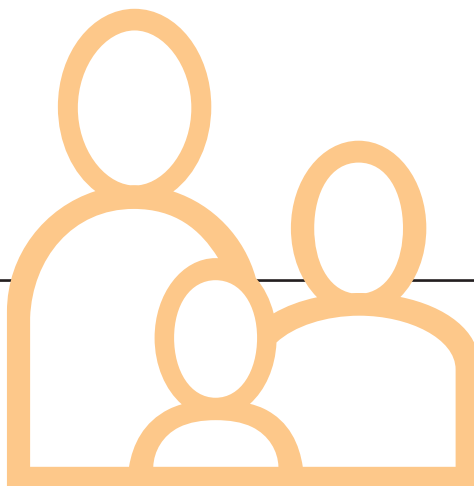
---

What every family and community has a right to know about

## Timing Births

1. Pregnancy before the age of 18 or after the age of 35 increases the health risks for the mother and her baby.
2. For the health of both mothers and children, there should be a space of at least two years between births.
3. The health risks of pregnancy and childbirth increase after four pregnancies.





4. Family planning services provide people with the knowledge and the means to plan when to begin having children, how many to have and how far apart to have them, and when to stop. There are many safe and acceptable ways of avoiding pregnancy.
  
5. Family planning is the responsibility of both men and women; everyone needs to know about the health benefits.





## Supporting Information

# Timing Births

**1. Pregnancy before the age of 18 or after the age of 35 increases the health risks for the mother and her baby.**

Every year some 515,000 women die from problems linked to pregnancy and childbirth. For every woman who dies, approximately 30 more develop serious, disabling problems. Family planning could prevent many of these deaths and much of this disability.

Delaying a first pregnancy until a girl is at least 18 years of age will help ensure a safer pregnancy and delivery, and will reduce the risk of her baby being born underweight. This is especially important in countries where early marriage is the custom.

A girl is not physically ready to begin bearing children until she is about 18 years of age. Childbirth is more likely to be difficult and dangerous for an adolescent than for an adult. Babies born to very young mothers are much more likely to die in the first year of life. The younger the mother, the greater the risk to her and her baby.

Young women need special help to delay pregnancy. Young women and their families should be given information about the risks of early pregnancy and how to avoid them.



After the age of 35, the health risks of pregnancy and childbirth begin to increase again. If a woman is over the age of 35 and has had four or more pregnancies, another pregnancy is a serious risk to her own health and that of the foetus.

---

## **2. For the health of both mothers and children, there should be a space of at least two years between births.**

The risk of death for young children increases by nearly 50 per cent if the space between births is less than two years.

One of the greatest threats to the health and growth of a child under the age of two is the birth of a new baby. Breastfeeding for the older child stops too soon, and the mother has less time to prepare the special foods a young child needs. She may not be able to give the older child the care and attention he or she needs, especially when the child is ill. As a result, children born less than two years apart usually do not develop as well, physically or mentally, as children born two years apart or more.

A woman's body needs two years to recover fully from pregnancy and childbirth. The risk to the mother's health is therefore greater if births come too close together. The mother needs time to get her health, nutritional status and energy back before she becomes pregnant again. Men need to be aware of the importance of a two-year space between births and the need to limit the number of pregnancies to help protect their family's health.

If a woman becomes pregnant before she is fully recovered from a previous pregnancy, there is a higher chance that her new baby will be born too early and weigh too little. Babies born underweight are less likely to grow well, more likely to become ill and four times more likely to die in the first year of life than babies of normal weight.

---

### **3. The health risks of pregnancy and childbirth increase after four pregnancies.**

A woman's body can easily become exhausted by repeated pregnancies, childbirth, breastfeeding and caring for small children. After four pregnancies, especially if there has been less than two years between births, she faces an increased risk of serious health problems such as anaemia ('thin blood') and haemorrhage (heavy loss of blood).

A baby is at greater risk of dying if the mother has had four or more pregnancies.

---

### **4. Family planning services provide people with the knowledge and the means to plan when to begin having children, how many to have and how far apart to have them, and when to stop. There are many safe and acceptable ways of avoiding pregnancy.**

Health clinics should offer advice to help people choose a family planning method that is acceptable, safe, convenient, effective and affordable.

Of the various contraceptive methods, only condoms protect against both pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS.

Exclusive breastfeeding can delay the return of the mother's fertility for approximately six months after childbirth. Exclusive breastfeeding provides a woman with 98 per cent protection from pregnancy, but only if her baby is under the age of six months, her menstrual periods have not returned, and the baby is breastfed on demand and exclusively – receiving no other foods or drinks.

**5. Family planning is the responsibility of both men and women; everyone needs to know about the health benefits.**

Men as well as women must take responsibility for preventing unplanned pregnancies. They should have access to information and advice from a health worker so that they are aware of the various methods of family planning that are available.

Information can also be obtained from a doctor, nurse, teacher, family planning clinic, and youth or women's organization.

