

Births to unmarried mothers in 1995 declined for the first time since 1940, according to a report based on statistics compiled by the National Center for Health Statistics and the US Bureau of the Census. Among unmarried women, aged 15 to 44 years, births dropped 4% from 1994 to 1995. Overall, births to all unmarried women declined slightly as well, down to 32% in 1995 from 32.6% in 1994.

"Birth rate trends for unmarried women show that the increases during the 1980s were not confined to teenagers, but were shared among all age groups," notes lead author Bernard Guyer, MD, MPH, FAAP, with Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health. "This is not just a problem of teens, it's a societal issue."

The report, which appears in the December issue of *Pediatrics*, cites an increase in the number of low birth weight infants between 1993 and 1994, from 7.2% to 7.3%. Preliminary data for 1995 indicate the rate held steady at 7.3%.

Other findings reported include:

- a decline in smoking during pregnancy of nearly 25% from 1989 to 1994, with the greatest reduction occurring among women younger than 30 years of age;
- a 2% increase in the number of multiple births per 1000 births in 1994 from 1993 levels, with twin births accounting for most of the increase in this category; and
- a decrease in the number of marriages and divorces of 1% and 2%, respectively, between 1994 and 1995.

Parents can take steps to prevent recurring acute otitis media in their children, explained Jerome O. Klein, MD, professor of pediatrics at Boston University School of Medicine. Dr Klein told attendees of a meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics that parents should limit their child's exposure to second-hand smoke, place the child in the supine sleeping position, and discourage the use of pacifiers. Placing children in smaller-sized daycare centers to

limit exposure and breastfeeding children will also provide protection against reinfection.

For those children who have had three episodes of acute otitis media in 6 months, or four in 12 months, or 2 in the first year of life in a family with a history of this infection, however, Dr Klein suggested amoxicillin as a first-line intervention (half of the therapeutic dose once a day [20 mg/kg]) maintained for approximately 6 months. This regimen benefits infants younger than 2 years old.

Describing pneumococcal vaccine as being "underused" by pediatricians, Dr Klein recommends using this treatment for youngsters beginning at age 2 because of the association between influenza and otitis media.

"Intuitively, it makes sense if you can prevent one respiratory episode where the potential in a child is so great for having associated otitis media that it probably is useful. The data are not substantial, but intuitively I would suggest this as part of your strategy," he said.

Surgical intervention may be necessary if this chemoprophylaxis regimen fails.

Otitis media—outside of coughs and colds—is the most common reason for working parents to miss a day on the job, according to results from a Gallup poll. The survey included 100 pediatricians and 1003 working mothers of children, aged 6 months to 5 years. The pediatricians cited working mothers' most common concerns as missing work and finding day care for their sick children.

Of those mothers working full time, 88% responded that they or their spouses missed work because of a sick child; most often (78%), the moms stayed at home rather than their spouses.

Eighty-one percent of the moms working full time reported sending their youngsters to day care at least occasionally despite their child's illness.

Patients' compliance proved to be another problem for the moms: 90% reported that better-tasting medicine would improve compliance, while 82% wished the medications would have fewer side effects.

The survey was sponsored by Pfizer, Inc, and has an error rate of plus or minus 10%. Results are published in the December 1996 issue of *Infectious Diseases in Children*.

A slightly shorter version of the gene that plays a role in the uptake of serotonin may be linked, in part, to anxiety in humans. Researchers in Germany as well as the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, tested more than 500 men to arrive at this conclusion.

Blood samples were taken from the participants, who were also queried via personality questionnaires. Those participants whose responses to the questions tended to be more pessimistic and anxiety-ridden were also found to have a short allele of the 5-HTT polymorphism.

Although there seems to be a link between the shorter version of the gene and anxiety, the researchers are quick to point out that there may be more than one gene responsible for this personality trait.

"You wouldn't know anything about somebody's personality just by looking at this gene in isolation," admits researcher Dr Dennis L. Murphy with NIH. Other genes as well as environmental factors should not be overlooked.

The November 29 issue of *Science* magazine features complete study results. ♦