

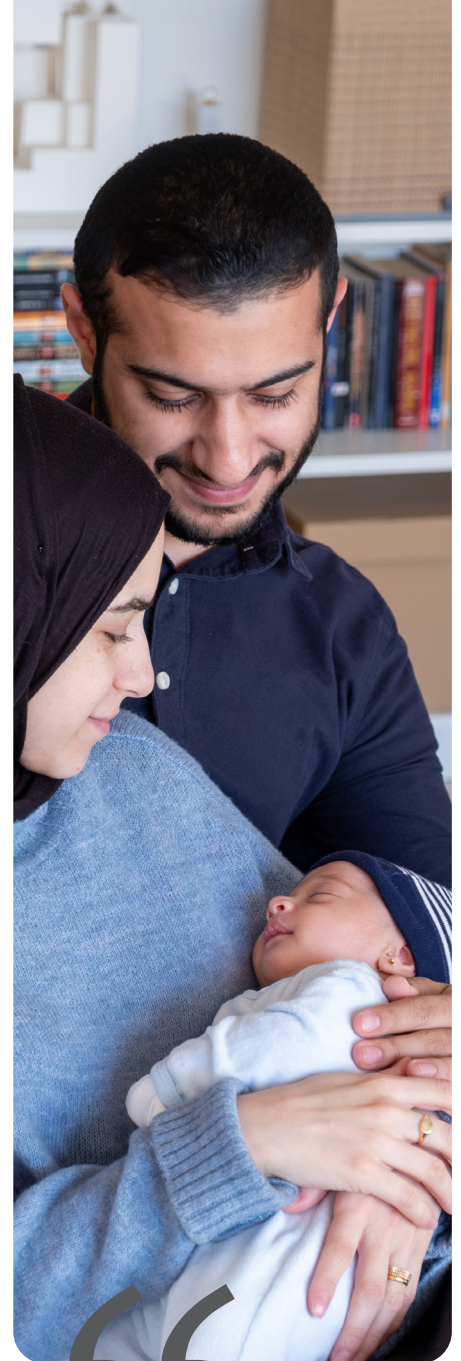
Improving infant health in Saudi Arabia

National transformation programs and policy reforms in the Middle East have prioritized enhancing healthcare systems to ensure accessibility, ascertain cost-effectiveness, and improve life expectancy and overall quality of life. One crucial indicator of a nation's health, social stability, and economic development is infant mortality. Currently, Saudi Arabia has an infant mortality rate (IMR) of 5.1 infant deaths per 1,000 live births, placing it 63rd out of 253 countries globally. By comparison, developed G20 countries have the lowest IMRs — Japan and Italy have IMRs of 1.6 and 2.2, respectively.

Although the Kingdom has made significant progress in healthcare delivery and outcomes, there is still room for the country to improve and position itself as a leader in infant health. By implementing a comprehensive set of interventions during the next 15 years, Saudi Arabia could lower its IMR by 50% and could save 7,500 to 9,000 infant lives.¹ That would elevate Saudi Arabia to the top 20 countries globally in terms of IMR, to a more vibrant and stable society while advancing the country's Vision 2030 goals of improving health outcomes and increasing life expectancy.

Lowering the IMR would also help grow Saudi Arabia's economy by increasing its workforce and productivity. The economic value lost per infant death is estimated at more than SAR 9 million, indicating significant long-term economic gains from a low IMR.² In addition, implementing evidence-based care measures to reduce preterm births could improve health outcomes while lowering healthcare costs. This is especially important, as treatment costs for preterm low-birth-weight infants can be **30 to 100 times higher** than for full-term infants.

Reducing the IMR calls for a comprehensive approach encompassing healthcare investments, workforce training, regulatory interventions backed by scientific studies, localized research and innovation, and evidence-based clinical interventions. Deploying real-time monitoring and evaluation systems to track progress and make adjustments as needed will be critical to success.



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Four interventions in particular have proven effective:

- 1 Antenatal screenings.** Antenatal care including regular screenings delivered by trained healthcare providers increases the likelihood that potential complications will be identified early, allowing for timely medical intervention. **Neonatal mortality decreases by 34%** in mothers who attend regular screenings.
- 2 Maternal supplementation.** Research shows iron and folic acid supplementation during pregnancy can reduce the risk of infant death by 34% during the first 11 months of life. This simple yet effective measure ensures that both mother and child receive essential nutrients for a healthy start to life.
- 3 Care immediately after birth.** Delaying cord clamping by just two minutes has been found to reduce the risk of death before discharge for premature babies by 66%. Promoting skin-to-skin contact, known as kangaroo mother care, has been associated with a 51% reduction in mortality among infants with low birth weight. Additionally, neonatal cooling therapy, a treatment that involves cooling the body temperature of newborns who have experienced hypoxic-ischemic encephalopathy (damage to the brain caused by a lack of oxygen) has been shown to reduce infant mortality by 36%.
- 4 Postnatal home visits.** Regular monitoring and support during the critical early days of life are paramount for infants and mothers. Receiving the first postnatal care visit within two days of birth has been associated with 64% lower mortality compared with those who did not receive a visit. Home visits promote breastfeeding and proper infant nutrition, and reduce the risk of postpartum complications.

Saudi Vision 2030 aims to increase life expectancy, improve healthcare services, achieve long-term population health goals, and elevate the country's position in global well-being indices. A targeted focus on reducing the IMR supports all four aims.

The scientific evidence supporting the recommended clinical interventions is clear, and the potential for saving lives is enormous. By prioritizing these measures and ensuring their adoption, Saudi Arabia can make significant strides toward a healthier, more prosperous future for all its residents.

¹ Strategy&'s proprietary model for infant mortality rate reduction calculation

² "Human Life Value" method calculation for Saudi Arabia

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