

Kangaroo mother care reduces infant mortality

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Professor Halvor Sommerfelt is the leader of CISMACH at the University of Bergen. Credit: Eivind Senneset.

Researchers at Centre for Intervention Science in Maternal and Child Health (CISMACH) at the University of Bergen (UiB) followed 8400 low birth weight infants, from 2015 to 2018.

The research team wanted to measure the effect of the so-called kangaroo mother care method on these children, both those born at home those who returned home only few hours after birth.

The method is based on holding the newborn tightly into the body with the help of a scarf or harness, during the first month, preferably more than 12 hours a day.

"We discovered that the chance of survival increased as much as 30 per cent within the first month and by 25 per cent within the first six months," says Professor Halvor Sommerfelt, leader of CISMACH, UiB.

"There are few health interventions that reduce mortality as much as 30 per cent. The only ones are vaccination programmes," Sommerfelt says.

Important contribution against child mortality

India is one of the countries in the world with the highest frequency of low birth [weight](#) babies. As many as one in four newborns is underweight.

"We know that the underweight [infants](#) are more vulnerable for disease and death than other infants. Half of the ones that don't survive, die during the first month of their life," Sommerfelt points out.

Home confinements have become less frequent in India, but it is still considered normal for [mothers](#) return home only six hours after giving birth, even if the infant is premature. Similar to other low- and middle-income countries, hospitals and health centres in India have little access to incubators and other modern technology.

"Most of the deaths occur among infants with low birth weight. Kangaroo mother care shows remarkable results in increasing survival. We hope that as many as possible will start to use the method," says Sommerfelt.

New guidelines

Earlier studies have shown that the use of Kangaroo Mother Care in hospital settings increased survival of low birth weight babies by 40 per cent. The new study documents this positive effect in community-based kangaroo mother care as well.

Sommerfelt believes that the World Health Organisation (WHO) will develop guidelines supporting this intervention within a year, recommending Kangaroo Mother Care at home, in addition to the recommendation for hospital use.

"It is, however, important to say that our study does not include children under 1.8 kilograms. Such small infants and very sick infants must be treated at a hospital until their health situation is stable,"

underlines Sommerfelt.

Easy and inexpensive treatment

The researchers do not know if the good effect from [kangaroo](#) mother care is caused by better access to breast feeding, or better temperature regulation or whether it is other factors such as the experience of safety when the child hears the mother's heartbeats.

"Kangaroo mother care is an easy and inexpensive initiative. I am convinced that it will be recommended, not only by WHO, but also by Indian health authorities," says Halvor Sommerfelt.

Facts:

The Kangaroo Mother Care Study:

- Researchers at Centre for Intervention Science in Maternal and Child Health (CISMAC) and their Indian partners at Society for Applied Studies in India, followed 45 000 pregnant woman and their 8,400 infants born with low birthweight, from 2015-2018.
- 150 researchers and [health](#) workers were recruited through CISMAC.
- Half of the infants were randomized into one group with Kangaroo Mother Care and another group with ordinary care. The two groups were compared.
- The infants in the intervention group had on average, four weeks and 11 hours per day with Kangaroo Mother Care.
- The study was conducted in close collaboration with WHO

Low birth weight:

- Every year 20 million low birth weight infants are born globally.
- 80 per cent of infant deaths occur among those with low birth weight. 50 percent of these are pre-born.
- Nearly 97 per cent of low [birth](#) weight infants are born in low- and [middle-income countries](#), 40 per cent of these in India.

More information: Sarmila Mazumder et al, Effect of community-initiated kangaroo mother care on survival of infants with low birthweight: a randomised controlled trial, *The Lancet* (2019).

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