Adolescents born preterm were less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic

Authors: Michael O'Shea, et al.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Compared with adolescents born at term, adolescents born preterm were less likely to say they drank alcohol, used marijuana, or took part in at least one unhealthy behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Adolescents born moderate or late preterm (between 28 and 37 weeks) reported feeling more socially connected during the pandemic, compared to before the pandemic, but they were also more likely to say the pandemic had a negative overall effect on their lives.

Who sponsored this study?

The Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program, Office of the Director, National Institutes of Health supported this research.

Why was this study needed?

The COVID-19 pandemic affected many adolescents' mental health, daily routines, and social lives. Some adolescents may have been especially vulnerable, including those born preterm (<37 weeks). Previous research suggests adolescents born preterm may be less likely to take part in unhealthy behaviors, such as drinking alcohol or using marijuana. ECHO researchers wanted to know whether adolescents born preterm responded to the pandemic differently from adolescents born at term. They looked at health-related behaviors, social connection, and how adolescents felt the pandemic affected their lives.

What were the study results?

Adolescents born preterm were less likely to report unhealthy behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic. Compared with adolescents born at term, adolescents born preterm were less likely to say they drank alcohol, used marijuana, or took part in at least one unhealthy behavior. Healthy or prosocial behaviors were common across all adolescents included in this study. More than half of the adolescents reported doing at least one positive activity, such as spending more time with family, reading, doing puzzles, practicing mindfulness, or talking with others.

Girls born preterm showed more pronounced differences in positive and unhealthy behaviors. Girls born extremely preterm (<28 weeks) were more likely to report healthy or prosocial behaviors. Adolescents born moderate or late preterm (between 28 and 37 weeks) reported feeling more socially connected during the pandemic, compared to before the pandemic, but they were also more likely to say the pandemic had a negative overall effect on their lives.

What was the study's impact?

The findings of this study suggest that adolescents employed multiple strategies to cope with the psychological stressors associated with the pandemic and that adolescents born preterm, as compared to those born at term, were less likely to take part in an unhealthy behavior and equally likely to take part in a healthy coping behavior. The study authors suggest that in future national

crises similar to the COVID-19 pandemic, these findings may help physicians and parents be better prepared to support adolescents, including adolescents born preterm. Additional studies could also help researchers identify counseling strategies that support healthy coping, family communication, and adolescent well-being during future pandemics, natural disasters, or other major disruptions.

Who was involved?

The study included 2,135 adolescents age 13 to 21 years and their caregivers from 13 ECHO Cohort Study Sites. Of these participants, 419 were born extremely preterm, 118 were born moderate or late preterm, and 1,598 were born at term.

What happened during the study?

Participants completed ECHO COVID-19 questionnaires between April 2020 and June 2022. The questionnaires asked adolescents about changes in healthy behaviors, unhealthy behaviors, social connection, and how the pandemic affected their lives. Researchers compared responses from adolescents born extremely preterm, adolescents born moderate or late preterm, and adolescents born at term. They also considered factors such as age, timing of questionnaire completion, caregiver education, and differences by child sex.

Footnote: Results reported here are for a single study. Other or future studies may provide new information or different results. You should not make changes to your health without first consulting your healthcare professional.

Where can I learn more?

Access the full journal article, titled “Child health-related behaviors, social connectedness, and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children born preterm in the ECHO Cohort,” in *BMC Pediatrics*.

The content is the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the National Institutes of Health.