

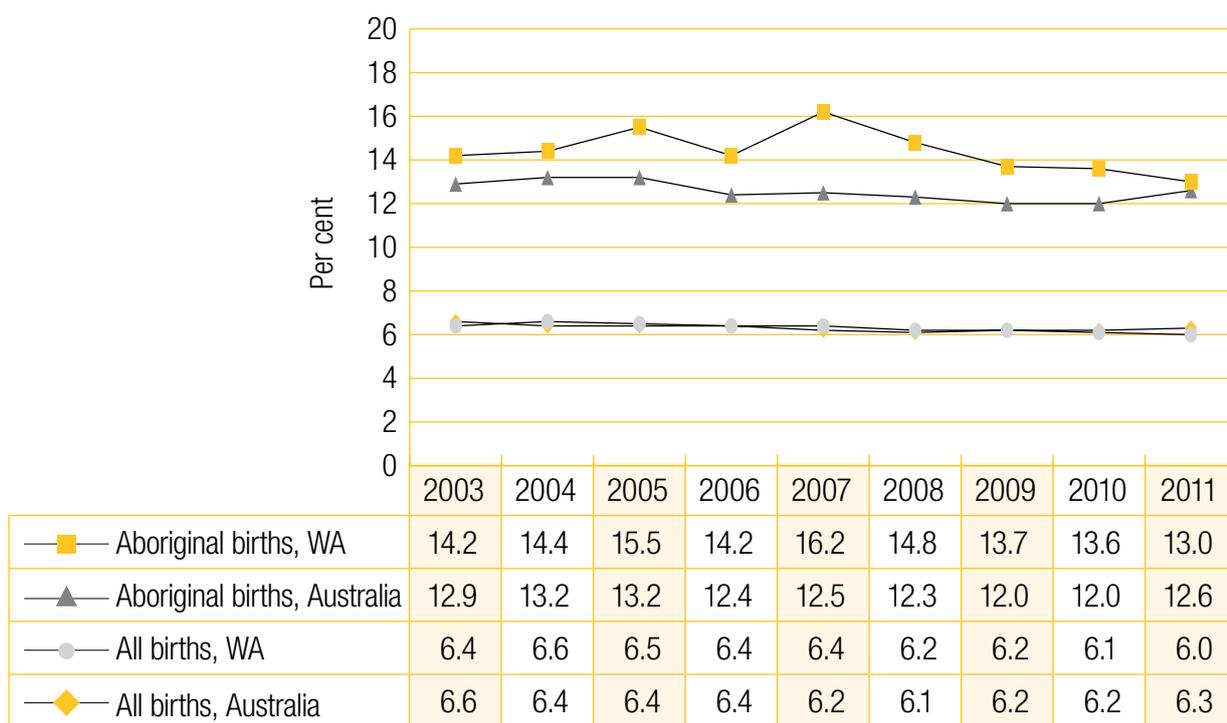
3.3 Birth weight

Why this measure is included

A baby's birth weight is a key indicator of health status. Babies are defined as low birth weight if their weight at birth is less than 2,500 grams. Babies born with a birth weight of less than 2,500 grams have an increased risk of neurological and physical disability, and morbidity in the first year. They are also more likely to experience ill-health in childhood.^{66 67}

A number of preventable risk factors are associated with poor perinatal outcomes such as low birth weight, the most common one being smoking during pregnancy.⁶⁸

Figure 3.4: Babies born at a low birth weight (less than 2,500g): in per cent, by Aboriginal births and all births, Western Australia and Australia, 2003 to 2011



Source: AIHW, *Australia's mothers and babies*, 2003–2011 [series]

Note: Only live-born babies are included in this data.

What is this measure?

The measure examines the percentage of live-born babies born at a low birth weight, that is, babies born at a birth weight of less than 2,500 grams. The data used in this measure comes from the series of annual reports *Australia's mothers and babies*, which are published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).⁶⁹ These reports provide a comprehensive collection of perinatal statistics on births in all states and territories and Australia overall.

This measure considers the overall percentage of live-born babies who were of low birth weight. It does not explore gestational age correlated birth weight.

Commentary

Figure 3.4 shows that in 2011, 6.0 per cent of babies born in WA weighed less than 2,500g. However, for babies born to Aboriginal mothers, the percentage was higher at 13.0 per cent.

The figure for WA has decreased in recent years from 6.6 per cent in 2004 to 6.0 per cent in 2011 and has always been similar to the overall Australian figure. The percentage of low-weight births in 2011 in WA (6.0%) is slightly lower than the Australian figure (6.3%).

However, when only Aboriginal mothers are considered, the WA percentage was consistently higher than the Australian figure between 2003 and 2010, with the WA figure ranging from a high in 2007 of 16.2 per cent to 13.0 per cent in 2011, compared to the Australian high of 13.2 per cent in 2005 and a low of 12.0 per cent in 2010. In 2011 the WA figure of 13.0 per cent is similar to the Australian figure of 12.6 per cent, reflecting an improvement in the WA figures since 2009 (Figure 3.4).

At an international level, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) health data for 2011 showed that Australia, with 6.2 per cent of low birth weight babies, recorded a result that was similar to the OECD average of 6.8 per cent. However, if only the babies born to Aboriginal mothers are considered, the percentage of low birth weight babies increases to 12.6 per cent, significantly higher than the OECD average and higher than any other OECD country.⁷⁰

Strategies

Improving Maternity Services: Working Together Across Western Australia. A Policy Framework, Government of Western Australia (released 2008)

Released in 2008, the main goal of this framework is to maintain a high standard of maternity care for all women and their babies. Further information is available at www.healthnetworks.health.wa.gov.au/projects/mat_services.cfm

The National Maternity Services Plan 2010

The National Maternity Services Plan provides a strategic national framework to guide policy and program development across Australia between 2010 and 2015. Further information is available at [www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/BFE6AE67A9BC1BF1CA257A1B001B4B2D/\\$File/maternity%20plan.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/publications/publishing.nsf/Content/BFE6AE67A9BC1BF1CA257A1B001B4B2D/$File/maternity%20plan.pdf)

National Partnership Agreement for Indigenous Early Childhood Development 2009 to 2014

This agreement between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments is intended to improve the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal babies and families. One element of this strategy provides funding to states and territories to increase access to antenatal care, while another provides a contribution to the New Directions: Mothers and Babies service to increase access to child and maternal health care for Aboriginal families. The agreement is available at www.federalfinancialrelations.gov.au/content/npa/health_indigenous/ctg-early-childhood/national_partnership.pdf

Want to know more?

Data on birth weight

The WA Department of Health publishes annual information on WA births, available at www.health.wa.gov.au/publications/subject_index/p/Perinatal_infant_maternal.cfm

The annual *Australia's mothers and babies* report provides perinatal statistics on births in Australia and is published by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, available at www.aihw.gov.au/publications/

Other information

Improving Maternity Services in Australia: The Report for the Maternity Services Review 2009, Australian Government

Further information on the maternity services review is available at www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/maternityservicesreview

The Commonwealth Government responded to the recommendations of the report with the \$120.5 million Budget package in 2009–10, 'Providing More Choice in Maternity Care – Access to Medicare and PBS for Midwives'. Details of this Budget package are available at www.health.gov.au/internet/budget/publishing.nsf/Content/budget2009-hmedia05.htm

The Aboriginal Maternity Services Support Unit (AMSSU) is supported by King Edward Memorial Hospital, and was developed in conjunction with recommendations from the Aboriginal Health Council of WA. The Unit is funded through the National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development.

More information on the Unit is available at www.kemh.health.wa.gov.au/services/amssu/index.htm

The *Moort boodjari* mia maternity health service for Aboriginal families in the north metropolitan area of WA provides support to pregnant Aboriginal women and their families. Information is available at www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/key-resources/programs-projects?pid=936

