

NEW DELHI: Indian women aren't spacing their children well. An average Indian woman delivers her second baby within 31 months of giving birth to her first child and this is adversely affecting mothers' health and children's chances of survival. Shockingly, the figure hasn't changed over the last 17 years.

A woman should ideally deliver her second child after a gap of at least three years from her first baby. If not done, second time mothers not only pose a threat to the growth of their foetus but also increase risk of a premature delivery. Earlier studies have reported a higher incidence of low birth weight and premature delivery among babies conceived within six months of a previous birth, compared to those conceived 18 to 23 months following the last baby.

According to UNICEF's 'State of the World's Children 2009' report, the intervals between two consecutive births in Bangladesh stands at 39 months, Indonesia 54 months, Nepal 34 months and Vietnam 47 months. Speaking to TOI, Aparajita Gogoi, national coordinator of the White Ribbon Alliance for Safe Motherhood in India, said, "It takes at least two years for a woman's body to recover from childbirth. Since nearly 52% of women in India are anaemic, a woman has to let her body replenish lost nutrients and the blood that she loses during delivery."

She added, "Since a mother breastfeeds her child for two years, a second child within 30 months would hamper nutrition intake of the second child."

According to UNICEF officials, spacing depends on proper use of contraceptives. "Women could use oral contraceptives or condoms. However, India's contraceptive programme has focused mainly on male sterilisation," an official said.

According to India's latest district-level household survey (DLHS 3), around 34% Delhiites said they had not given importance to family planning. Only 21.9% people admitted to using condoms during sexual intercourse. Only 1.4% women admitted to using emergency contraceptive pills.

Meanwhile, another social evil — child marriage — is increasing India's maternal and infant deaths. Girls who give birth before the age of 15 are five times more likely to die in childbirth than women in their 20s. If a mother is under the age of 18, her infant's risk of dying in its first year of life is 60% greater than that of an infant born to a mother older than 19.

"More than 40% of the world's child marriages take place in India. Worldwide, more than 60 million women between 20-24 were married before they were 18. Child brides become mothers much before their bodies are physically mature for pregnancy," UNICEF's Karin Hulshof said.

She added that child marriage prevented many girls from continuing their education, leaving them unaware of the risks and responsibilities of pregnancy. They were also less likely to seek medical attention and immunise their babies.

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