

How a Pittsburgh-area hospital is lowering the number of newborns in withdrawal

Neonatal abstinence syndrome rate begins falling this year at Uniontown hospital

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Moms who use drugs during pregnancy expose their babies in the womb, and that can trigger drug withdrawal symptoms after the baby is born.

The condition is known as neonatal abstinence syndrome, and Fayette County has long been the epicenter of the problem in Pennsylvania. Now, doctors and nurses there are finding ways of pushing back.

A little luck has helped, too.

Fayette County was a hotspot last year for newborns experiencing withdrawal symptoms, according to a new report by the Pennsylvania Health Care Cost Containment Council, a state research agency in Harrisburg. These babies can be irritable, sleep poorly and have tremors.

In addition, their hospital stays can last five times longer than babies born unexposed, so the cost of treatment is higher.

Fayette County mothers delivered just 15 of these babies in 2025 but the county's rate of neonatal abstinence syndrome per 1,000 hospitalizations was highest among Pennsylvania's 67 counties, at 23.8 per 1,000 newborn stays.

Mothers in rural Somerset County, about 70 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, delivered 11 affected children last year; the county ranked second highest in the state, with 21.6 newborns with withdrawal per 1,000 newborn stays, according to the report.

In Fayette County, the newborn withdrawal symptoms last year were caused by women using methadone, cocaine, fentanyl and other drugs during pregnancy, hospital officials said.

The statewide average in 2025 was just 6.2 hospitalizations of babies with withdrawal symptoms per 1,000 newborn stays, or about a quarter the rate in Fayette County.

In raw numbers, Allegheny County led Pennsylvania in the number of these babies born in withdrawal at 84, followed by Philadelphia County with 83. Statewide, there were 719 babies diagnosed with neonatal abstinence syndrome in 2025.

The PHC4 report doesn't distinguish between fetal exposure to medications taken to kick illegal drug dependence such as buprenorphine or abused drugs like fentanyl, but prescription opioids last longer in the baby's body than street drugs, which could mean a longer hospital stay, said Sharon Schell, a neonatologist at Conemaugh Medical System in Johnstown, Cambria County.

"Any opioid mom takes puts the baby at risk," Schell said. "Prescribed opioids are longer-acting agents, so it takes longer for it to wear off for the baby, it can take five to seven days."

Newborns suffering from drug withdrawal can be irritable, feed poorly, vomit frequently and have difficulty sleeping. Hospital stays for these infants average 16 days versus three days for newborns not exposed to drugs during pregnancy, according to a 2020 study in the Southern Medical Journal.

And the cost of care for a drug-exposed baby can be more than four times the cost of an unexposed baby, $18,800 versus $4,200, according to a 2017 study published in the medical journal JAMA Network.

Fayette has been a hotspot for these births for many years, and many of these babies were born at the WVU Medicine Golisano Children's Birthing Center in Uniontown, the only maternity hospital in the rural county of 127,000 residents. Somerset County, population about 72,000, has no hospital specifically equipped for moms to deliver their babies.

The nearest labor and delivery hospital for Somerset mothers is about 30 miles away in Johnstown.

But starting two or three years ago, doctors at WVU Medicine Uniontown Hospital began identifying moms who used illegal drugs much earlier in their pregnancies, often from their first prenatal visits, and getting them into treatment programs, said Tiffany Blosser, an advanced practice nurse who has spent her 18-year career in nursing working with newborns.

The result: There have been 15 neonatal abstinence births so far this year at the hospital, down from 22 of the births in 2025, Blosser said. Significantly, affected newborns have needed less medication to ease withdrawal symptoms than in past years.

"It's dramatically different from what it was five years ago," Blosser said. "We've got a lot of community involvement."

Drug abuse trends have also been working in the hospital's favor, with fentanyl use, for example, continuing to fall from a peak in 2023, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Our moms are having better access from the beginning of their pregnancy," said Meredith Aumer, chief nursing officer at WVU Medicine Uniontown Hospital. "They're referred into a treatment plan before

delivery and given resources upon discharge — car seats, disposable diapers."

The hospital has five labor and delivery suites, 11 rooms for postpartum care and a three-bed critical care nursery. After closing in 2019, Uniontown's maternity unit reopened in 2025 after the hospital merged with Morgantown-based WVU Medicine.

Mark "Cody" Smith, associate program director, division of neonatology at WVU Medicine in Morgantown, said he has seen an encouraging trend in illegal drug abuse in recent years.

"Since the peak of the COVID-19 years, we've seen less neonatal abstinence syndrome," he said. "It's continuing to go down and down and down in our state. That's just an effort on everyone's part.

"It's been a really nice trend we've been seeing," he said.

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