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High caesarean birth rates concern obstetricians

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The percentage of babies born by Cesarean section in Canada is at an all-time high, exposing mothers to increased risks, says the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (SOGC).

From 1993 to 2006, the rate of C-sections increased from 17.6 per cent up to 26.3 per cent -- more than one in four children.

For a low-risk childbirth that is progressing normally, C-sections create substantially longer recovery times for mothers, says the SOGC. They also present greater risks of complications such as infection, bleeding, scarring, chronic pelvic pain, and damage to the intestines or bladder.

C-sections also make a repeat C-section more likely in a subsequent pregnancy.

As a result, the SOGC is urging women and healthcare professionals to opt for C-sections only when medically necessary.

"While the individual risk for a woman having a C-section is very small, the rising rate is certainly a concern," SOGC president Dr. Guylaine Lefebvre said in a press release.

"We fear that there may be an emerging trend towards more scheduled childbirth and routine intervention. We need to be sure that C-sections are not driven by convenience, that interventions are medically indicated, and that the safety of a woman and her baby are the driving factors in these decisions."

Additionally, the high number of C-sections being conducted is placing a strain on the healthcare system.

Dr. André Lalonde, SOGC executive vice-president, said the increase has imposed an "excess burden on a maternity care system that is already facing a shortage of obstetricians and other health professionals."

Many factors contributed to the increase in C-sections, including rising obesity rates and the trend for women to delay pregnancy until later in life, said the SOGC.

Still, the organization said contributing factors such as the effects of the current shortage of maternity care providers or the role of changing patient and physician attitudes about intervention in childbirth are not as clearly understood.

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