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Canada's C-section rate at record high

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Canada's caesarean section rate has reached a record high, with one in four babies now delivered through an incision in its mother's belly.

The country's C-section rate stands at 26.3 per cent, up from 17.6 per cent in 1993, the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada was to report Wednesday at its 64th annual clinical meeting in Calgary.

"For Canada, one of the safest places in the world to give birth, this rising rate presents a concerning trend for the future," the Ottawa-based doctors' group said in a statement.

Several factors are driving the phenomenon, including the growing proportion of overweight and obese mothers. Twenty-three per cent of women of childbearing age in Canada are obese, and adult obesity rates are rising fastest in the 25- to 34-year old age group, nearly doubling in the past 25 years.

Obese women tend to have longer labours, and to give birth to bigger babies, putting them at higher risk for a C-section, says Dr. Guylaine Lefebvre, the society's president and chief of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at St. Michael's Hospital in Toronto.

As well, women are putting off having babies until they're older, and older first-time mothers are more likely to require C-sections. According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the average age of a Canadian woman who had a C-section in 2005-2006 was 30.4, compared to 28.7 for women who had a vaginal delivery.

But the country's all-time-high C-section rate is also being driven by the growing number of women seeking "elective" caesareans, a phenomenon labelled "too posh to push" after Victoria Beckham and other celebrity moms began popularizing the practice.

"We fear that there may be an emerging trend towards more scheduled childbirth and routine intervention," Lefebvre said. "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."

The society is urging Canadian doctors and women to choose a C-section only when there is a medical reason to warrant one.

"Our position is that normal childbirth should be encouraged and should be accessible to women across the country," Lefebvre says.

The society is working on an information pamphlet for pregnant women. "I think it's important to reassure women that a caesarean is relatively safe but it does have higher risks of complications than normal childbirth," Lefebvre says.

C-sections require longer recovery and hospital stays. Other risks include infections, scarring, increased blood loss and damage to the intestines or bladder. Babies born via C-sections are at increased risk of breathing problems.

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