



Diseases of Infancy and Childhood

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Children are not merely little adults, and their diseases are not merely variants of adult diseases. Many childhood conditions are unique to, or at least take distinctive forms in, this stage of life and so are discussed separately in this chapter. Diseases originating in the perinatal period are important in that they account for significant morbidity and mortality. As would be expected, the chances for survival of live-born infants improve with each passing week. This progress represents, at least in part, a triumph of improved medical care. Better prenatal care, more effective methods of monitoring the condition of the fetus, and judicious resort to cesarean section before term when there is evidence of fetal distress, have all contributed toward bringing into this world live-born infants who in past years might have been stillborn. This has resulted in an increased number of *high-risk infants* in the population. Nonetheless, the infant mortality rate in the United States has shown a decline from a level of 20 deaths per 1000 live births in 1970 to about 6.1 deaths in 2010, the latest year for which complete data are available. Although the death rate has continued to decline for all infants, African Americans continue to have an infant mortality rate more than twice (12.4 deaths per 1000 live births) that of American whites (5.3 deaths). Worldwide, infant mortality rates vary widely, from as low as 1.8 deaths per 1000 live births in Luxembourg, to as high as 180 deaths in the African subcontinent. Rather

dismayingly, the United States ranks thirty-first in infant mortality rates among developed nations in the Western hemisphere.

Each stage of development of the infant and child is prey to a somewhat different group of disorders. The data available permit a survey of four time spans: (1) the neonatal period (the first 4 weeks of life), (2) infancy (the first year of life), (3) age 1 to 4 years, and (4) age 5 to 14 years.

The major causes of death in infancy and childhood are listed in [Table 10-1](#). Congenital anomalies, disorders relating to short gestation (prematurity) and low birth weight, and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) represent the leading causes of death in the first 12 months of life. Once the infant survives the first year of life, the outlook brightens measurably. In the next two age groups—1 to 4 years and 5 to 9 years—unintentional injuries resulting from accidents have become the leading cause of death. Among the natural diseases, in order of importance, congenital anomalies and malignant neoplasms assume major significance. It would appear then that, in a sense, life is an obstacle course. Thankfully for the great majority, the obstacles are comfortably overcome.

The following discussion looks at specific conditions encountered during the various stages of infant and child development.