

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) - risks

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is the unexpected death of a baby where there is no apparent cause of death. The current rate in Australia is around one in every 3,000 births, or 88 babies each year. This compares to about 500 babies lost to SIDS in 1990. The dramatic drop in the number of SIDS cases is due to changes made in some childcare practices.

Following recommended practices can dramatically reduce the risk of SIDS. However, making the suggested changes can only reduce the risk. A baby can still die from SIDS even if recommendations are followed.

Put your baby to sleep on their back

The risk of SIDS is increased if your baby sleeps on their stomach. It is important to put your baby to sleep on their back instead. Over time, this may slightly flatten the back of your baby's skull, but any 'positional moulding' usually improves by itself without any medical intervention before the child's first birthday.

Make sure your baby's head won't get covered during sleep

In some SIDS cases, the babies are found with bedding over their faces. Some suggestions to prevent this include:

- Don't put your baby on a water bed or bean bag.
- Don't use soft bedding like quilts, doonas, duvets or pillows.
- Use a firm, well-fitting mattress.
- Don't use cot bumpers.
- Keep soft toys out of the cot.
- Position your baby's feet at the bottom of the cot.
- Tuck in the bedclothes securely.

Avoid exposing infants to tobacco smoke

If either parent smokes during the pregnancy, the risk of SIDS is increased. Babies exposed to tobacco smoke after birth are also at an increased risk of SIDS. Stop smoking before you conceive or as soon as you can into the pregnancy – the less you smoke, the lower the risk of SIDS. If your partner smokes, encourage them to quit. Make your house a smoke-free environment at all times and don't allow anyone to smoke near your baby.

Provide a safe sleeping environment

Sleep your baby in its own safe sleeping environment next to your bed for the first six to twelve months of their life. Research in New Zealand and the UK has shown that sleeping a baby in the same room, but not in the same bed, with the parents in the first six to twelve months of life is protective. This is thought to be because parents can see the baby and easily check to see that baby is safe.

This protective effect does not work if the baby is in the room with other children, probably because the children do not know if the baby is safe or not.

Other factors

There are other factors that may have a bearing on the risk of SIDS. These factors include:

- **Temperature** – make sure your baby doesn't overheat or get too cold. A good rule of thumb is to dress your baby as you would dress yourself, to be comfortably warm. If your baby has a fever, use fewer bed coverings or none at all.
- **Bedsharing** – there is an increased risk of SIDS if a mother who is a smoker shares her bed with her baby. Even if you don't smoke, bedsharing can still be unsafe if your baby is less than four months of age, slips under the bedding or into pillows, is trapped between the bed and the parent or the wall, falls out of bed, overheats or is rolled on. Don't bedshare if you have been drinking alcohol or are affected by other drugs. There is a very high risk of infant death and sleeping accidents when a baby shares a sofa or couch with an adult during sleep.

Some factors do not have a bearing on the risk of SIDS. These factors include:

- **Immunisations** – the highest incidence of SIDS happens between the ages of two and four months, which is coincidentally the same age that babies are often immunised. There is no link. In fact, there is some evidence that immunised babies are actually at a lower risk of SIDS than non-immunised babies.
- **Specific baby care products** – there is no convincing scientific research evidence that any specific baby care product reduces the risk of SIDS. This includes positional aids for babies such as anti-roll devices and items that fasten a baby in position.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- SIDS and Kids Victoria Tel. (03) 9822 9611 or 1300 308 307
- Your midwife
- Maternal and child health nurse

Things to remember

- Always put your baby to sleep on their back.
- Make sure your baby's head remains uncovered during sleep.
- Avoid exposing infants to tobacco smoke before birth and after.
- Provide a safe sleeping environment.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

SIDS and Kids Victoria

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