

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) explained

The unexpected death of a baby, when there is no apparent cause of death, is called sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). In Australia, SIDS accounts for the deaths of more babies between the ages of one month and one year than any known cause. A baby can die of SIDS at any time of the day or night, but most die quietly in their sleep. SIDS is also known as 'cot death'.

Young babies are most at risk

SIDS is more common in babies between the ages of two to four months, but it can happen to younger and older babies too. SIDS occurs in both bottle-fed and breastfed babies. Of those who die, around 60 per cent are boys.

No known causes

People once suspected such things as choking, parental neglect or accidental smothering, but the real causes of SIDS remain unknown. There are no consistent warning signs to alert us to the risk of SIDS. Sometimes the baby wasn't feeding well on the day they died or may have had a slight cold or tummy upset. Minor infections are often found in SIDS babies, but these infections are mild and not enough to have caused death. In some cases bloodied froth or vomit is found around the baby's mouth, but this naturally occurs soon after death and doesn't cause the death. Research is ongoing.

Risk factors

The incidence of SIDS in Australia is on the decline. Currently, it is about the same as in other Western countries – around one in every 3,000 births, or 88 babies each year.

The incidence of SIDS has halved in Australia and many other countries since some childcare practices were changed, such as:

- Putting the baby to sleep on their back
- Making sure the baby's head remains uncovered during sleep
- Avoiding exposing baby to tobacco smoke, both before and after birth.
- However, SIDS can still occur, even when all the known risk factors have been ruled out.

Feelings of guilt and blame

There is a common belief that marital break-up always follows the death of a baby, but this hasn't been supported by experience or research. Some of the usual emotions felt by bereaved parents include guilt, anger, fear, blame and despair. Because the causes of SIDS are unknown, parents will often come up with their own explanations for the tragedy and blame themselves.

It may be helpful for grieving parents to talk with people outside of the family, such as other bereaved parents, doctors, social workers or counsellors. However, many people find their most valuable support comes from their own family and friends.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Social worker
- SIDS and Kids Victoria Tel. (03) 9822 9611 or 1300 308 307

- National Association of Loss and Grief (NALAG) Tel. (03) 9331 3555 9650 3000 or 1800 100 023 – for referral to an accredited grief counsellor

Things to remember

- Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is the name for the sudden and unexpected death of a baby when there is no apparent cause of death.
- The risks of SIDS can be reduced by changing some childcare practices.
- The rate of SIDS in Australia and other Western countries is declining.

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

SIDS and Kids Victoria

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