

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) occurs when an apparently healthy infant (under age 1) dies suddenly in his or her sleep, and no other cause of death is identified. It is sometimes called crib death. Although it's not always possible to prevent SIDS, certain steps can reduce the risk. The most important is placing babies on their backs to sleep, not on their stomachs or sides.

What is SIDS?

SIDS isn't a specific disease. Instead, it is defined as the sudden death of an infant for which no explanation can be found, despite a thorough medical history, investigation of the death scene, and autopsy. Most SIDS deaths occur in babies less than 6 months old.

The cause of SIDS is unknown. Some babies have apparent life-threatening events such as apnea (interrupted breathing) or cyanosis (turning blue) but don't die. These infants may be targeted for close monitoring.

What causes SIDS?

- The cause of SIDS is unknown—a combination of genetic and environmental factors seems to be involved.
- There is also evidence of subtle, mild abnormalities of the brain that affect breathing and heart rate. Autopsies of babies who died of SIDS often show signs that the infant was not getting enough oxygen for weeks or months before death.

What increases your infant's risk of SIDS?

Many risk factors for SIDS have been identified:

- Smoking increases the risk of SIDS. This includes smoking by the mother during pregnancy and smoking around the baby after birth.
- Babies who sleep on their stomachs are at higher risk.
- Risk is increased for premature babies, and for infants whose mothers didn't get adequate medical care during pregnancy.
- Other factors related to the baby's sleep environment increase the risk of SIDS, including sleeping on a soft mattress or pad or a sheepskin; and sleeping with pillows or heavy blankets.
- Babies who are overheated or overbundled may be at higher risk.

- Sleeping with parents may increase the risk of SIDS. In particular, bed sharing has been linked to increased risk if the mother smokes, if other children or adults other than the parents are in the bed, if the baby and parent are sleeping on a sofa, and if the parents are using alcohol and other drugs.
- There may be a small increase in risk if a previous child died of SIDS.
- Babies who have had an apparent life-threatening event (such as apnea or cyanosis) may be at increased risk.
- Risk is higher for African-American babies than white babies and lower for Hispanic and Asian babies.
- The SIDS rate is higher for boys.

Can SIDS be prevented?

Although SIDS cannot always be prevented, there are several things you can do to reduce your baby's risk:

- **Place babies on their backs to sleep!** This is an important step toward reducing your infant's risk of SIDS. Since the American Academy of Pediatrics started its national "Back to Sleep" campaign, the SIDS rate has decreased by about half.
- Each day give your baby some "tummy time" while he or she is awake. Spending time on their stomachs is normal and natural for babies. It also helps to avoid a problem called "positional plagiocephaly," in which the baby's head develops a flattened shape from spending too much time in one position.
- **Don't place the baby on soft surfaces like waterbeds or sofas.** Don't put pillows, loose blankets, or stuffed toys near the baby.
- **Avoid tobacco smoke!** Don't smoke during pregnancy. After birth, don't allow anyone to smoke around the baby. Not smoking reduces many other child health risks as well.
- Giving your baby a pacifier at sleep time may help to reduce the risk of SIDS, but should not be started until breast feeding is well established.
- If bed sharing, parents shouldn't smoke or use alcohol or other drugs that could change the way they sleep.
- Avoid letting the baby get too hot in the crib—use pajamas appropriate for the room temperature. Don't overbundle the infant.
- Avoid products marketed as SIDS-prevention devices (for example, designed to keep the baby in a certain position or monitoring devices). None of these products has been proven effective in preventing SIDS.

- Home monitors (apnea/cardiac monitors) have not been shown to prevent SIDS, except in certain circumstances.

 **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if you have any questions about SIDS risk factors or about strategies to reduce your child's risk of SIDS.

Where can I get more information?

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development offers more information on SIDS and the "Back to Sleep" campaign on the Internet at www.nichd.nih.gov/sids/sids.cfm, or call 1-800-370-2943.