

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)

What is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome?

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), also known as “Crib Death”, refers to the sudden and unexpected death of an apparently healthy infant whose death remains unexplained even after a complete autopsy.

SIDS is most likely to occur in babies between 2 and 4 months. The rate of SIDS goes down by half at 6 months of age, though it still happens up to one year of age. There are about 150 SIDS deaths in Canada each year, or 1 in every 2,000 live births. SIDS is still the leading cause of death of infants between one month and one year.

What causes SIDS?

We don't know for certain what causes SIDS. However, we do know that some babies are at higher risk of SIDS than others.

Sometimes the babies are at higher risk because of things we can't fix or control. For example, aboriginal babies have a higher rate of SIDS than non-aboriginal babies. We know that baby boys are at a higher risk than baby girls. Other babies who seem to be at higher risk are premature babies and babies with low birth weight. SIDS occurs during all seasons of the year. There is no indication of a higher risk for babies who have had a SIDS brother or sister.

What can I do to reduce the risk for my baby?

1. Put babies to sleep on their backs, on a firm flat surface.

Research tells us that babies who sleep on their backs are less likely to die of SIDS than babies who sleep on their tummies or sides.

Normal, healthy babies (even newborns) do *not* choke or have any other problems caused by sleeping on their backs, although it's a good idea to “burp” your baby after feeding. However, there are certain health conditions that do require the tummy-down sleeping position. You should discuss your baby's particular needs with your doctor.

When infants are awake, some “tummy time” is necessary for developmental reasons. This will also

avoid temporary flat spots that may develop on the back of their head.

You do not need to force babies to sleep on their back when they are able to turn from their back to their tummy on their own (usually 5 to 7 months), though you should still place them on their back to sleep.

2. Don't smoke during pregnancy and don't smoke around babies.

Cigarette smoke puts babies at higher risk of respiratory infection and also increases the risk of dying from SIDS. A baby exposed to second hand smoke, or whose mother smoked before *or* after birth, is at much higher risk for SIDS. Don't let other people, like family members, friends or babysitters, smoke around your baby. Talk with your doctor if you or your spouse need help in quitting smoking.

3. Keep babies at a comfortable temperature - not too cold, not too hot.

Sometimes, in trying to keep a baby warm enough, we can go too far, and end up with an over-heated baby. An over-heated baby is at higher risk of dying of SIDS. You know that a baby is just right when the baby's head is warm. A baby who is sweating behind the ears and at the back of the neck is an over-heated baby. A good rule of thumb for dressing your baby is to dress them in the same number of layers of clothing, as *you* would wear, *plus* one more layer. No two babies are alike and a baby's hand and feet are normally a little cool. Check the back of your baby's neck; if he or she is sweating, *take off a layer*.

4. Breastfeeding

Babies who are breastfed may be at less risk of dying from SIDS. Breastfeeding also gives your baby significant nutritional and psychological benefits, and helps strengthen their immune system.

If you need help with breastfeeding, talk to your local public health nurse or midwife. You may also get in touch with a local support group for breastfeeding mothers. Your public health nurse or midwife may be able to help you find a group in your own community.

5. Do not use alcohol or drugs.

The use of certain drugs or substances during and

after pregnancy is strongly discouraged. These include alcohol, marijuana, crack, cocaine, heroin, and others. Evidence suggests that the use of these substances may increase the risk of SIDS.

6. Other risk factors:

Bed sharing is a common practice for many families. There is no evidence that an infant sharing the bed with a parent or sibling has a reduced risk of SIDS. The risk of SIDS is increased if the person who shares the bed is a smoker, or has been consuming alcohol or drugs that may make them less responsive.

Other baby tips for safe sleeping:

- Make sure that your baby is sleeping on a flat, firm surface, free of clutter such as pillows, quilts or heavy blankets and stuffed toys.
- Don't let a baby sleep on a soft mattress, a soft pillow, on a duvet or quilt or on a waterbed. Don't use bumper pads, lambskin or similar products. Firm, flat bedding should be used, with sheets and light blankets, but without products to maintain the sleeping position.
- Keep loose plastic, plastic bags, and stuffed toys away from your baby's face because of the danger of suffocation.
- Make sure there are no gaps bigger than an inch (3 cm) between the mattress and the crib or bed frame, when the mattress is pushed into the corner of the crib. Your baby's head can get trapped in the gap between mattress and frame, and the baby can suffocate.
- Make sure the crib bars are *less* than 2 1/2 inches (6 cm) apart, so the baby's head can't get through. If the baby's head gets trapped between the bars of the crib, the baby can suffocate.
- Make sure there are no knobs on a crib that could catch a baby's clothing. If a baby tries to climb out of a crib, and catches clothing on a knob, the baby could strangle.
- Ask your doctor to arrange for you to get a copy of "Baby's Best Chance" from your local public health nurse or pharmacy. It has lots of information about safe care of your baby.

If your baby has died of SIDS

It is important to understand that following these tips can reduce the risk of SIDS, but cannot prevent all SIDS deaths. The cause or causes of SIDS are still not known, and parents of a child who has died of SIDS should not think that their childcare practices cause their baby's death.

If you have lost a baby to SIDS, try to understand that not all cases of SIDS can be prevented.

Remember, there are people who can help you during the time of your grief. Your doctor, public health nurse, or minister can help you to find counseling or a parent support group with people who have experienced a similar kind of loss, who can support you and be with you and your family.

Summary

There are four things to bear in mind that can reduce the chance of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS):

- Normal healthy babies should be put on their back for sleep.
- They should be cared for in a smoke-free environment.
- All women should be encouraged to breastfeed their babies.
- Infants should be dressed and covered so as to avoid overheating.

The contents of this BC HealthFile are based in part on information provided by the Canadian Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths, the Canadian Institute of Child Health, the Canadian Paediatric Society, and Health Canada.

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