

# Sudden Infant Death Syndrome



Crib close to parent's bed

Firm mattress

Infant not overclothed

Crib empty—no pillows, bumpers, or toys

Infant on back

## Crib Death

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is the unexpected, unexplained death of an apparently healthy baby. The majority of infants who die from SIDS are between the ages of 2 and 4 months, but SIDS can occur from 1 month to 1 year of age. Parents of SIDS victims often feel overwhelming guilt over their child's death even though no physician can explain what caused the death or whether it could have been prevented.

In SIDS, no symptoms or warning signs occur prior to the infant's death. A baby who dies from SIDS simply does not wake up from sleep, and the reason for this is not clear. Certain infants are at high risk for death from SIDS due to unalterable factors such as male sex, low birthweight, and African American or Native American ethnicity.

Based on research, it is known that certain preventive measures can be taken to lower the risk of SIDS. New parents should be educated on these measures to help reduce the chance of death from SIDS. The most important step parents can take is to place their baby to sleep on his or her back instead of on his or her stomach or side. It is especially important for parents to instruct family members, babysitters, day-care staff, and other caretakers that the baby must be on his or her back whenever napping or sleeping because babies who are placed on their stomachs when they normally sleep on their backs are more susceptible to SIDS.

## It Is Important for Infants to Consistently Sleep on Their Backs



*Adherence to various preventive sleeping measures for infants lessens the risk of SIDS.*

Each year, about 2,500 infants in this country die from unexplained causes while sleeping peacefully. Such deaths are labeled *sudden infant death syndrome* (SIDS) only after all possible causes of death, including accidents, abuse, and congenital defects, have been eliminated.

### Possible Causes

Although the cause of SIDS is poorly understood, researchers are studying physical characteristics of infants who have died from SIDS to find a common link. While some investigations have shown that such babies may have heart problems or breathing difficulties, other research has found that the environment may hold a clue to the cause of SIDS. Several risk factors probably are present in infants who are victims of SIDS.

Several factors put a baby at greater risk for SIDS. Some risks cannot be controlled, such as male sex, low birthweight, and African American or American Indian ethnicity. Infants who sleep on their stomachs consistently and those who occasionally are placed on their stomachs to sleep have the highest risk of SIDS. Other factors include birth during the cold winter months, maternal smoking during pregnancy, and smoke exposure after birth.

### Common Parental Concerns

Parents often worry that infants who lie on their backs while sleeping can choke, but it has been shown that this sleeping position does not increase the likelihood of choking in healthy babies. Infants with gastrointestinal reflux disease may do better sleeping on their stomachs, but parents should ask their pediatrician for a recommendation first. Once a baby can roll over unaided, he or she should be allowed to do so.

Another common parental concern is the flat spot that can develop on the back of an infant's head from sleeping on his or her back. This is a harmless condition, but it can be avoided by holding the baby upright whenever possible and allowing the baby to spend waking time on his or her tummy under an adult's watchful eye. Alternating the direction of the infant's head each time he or she is placed in the crib to sleep also can help prevent a flat spot from developing.

### Safe Sleeping Conditions

Crib bedding should include a firm mattress; fluffy bumper pads should not be used, and stuffed toys should be kept outside the crib. It is best to use a sleeper that keeps the baby warm (but not overly so) without additional covers. If a blanket must be used, it should be placed no higher than the infant's armpits and firmly tucked under the mattress on all three sides. An infant should never sleep in an adult bed or with an adult in the bed, since these situations can cause smothering. It is fine for the baby to sleep in a separate bassinet or crib in the parents' room (often recommended for infants up to 6 months). Some physicians recommend offering the infant a pacifier as a sleep aid; its use should never be forced, however. If the baby is being breast-fed, a pacifier could be introduced four to six weeks after birth to allow breast-feeding to become established first.

One day, we will fully understand what causes SIDS. Until then, the best treatment is prevention. All parents of newborns should be familiar with current recommendations for avoiding SIDS.