

Reducing the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is very rare, but it is still something that worries many expectant and new parents. SIDS, also known as cot death or crib death, affects fewer than one infant in 6,000 in Sweden. Research shows that some simple measures can reduce the risk significantly. Here is some advice for you as a parent, based on current research.

We still do not know the cause of SIDS with any certainty, despite many years of research. What we do know is that SIDS most often affects infants under six months old, and that death almost always occurs when the infant is asleep.

One theory is that the infant temporarily stops breathing (apnea), perhaps as a result of breathing becoming more difficult if the face is covered. This in turn leads to a slower pulse and reduced oxygen level. Normally an infant will wake up and recover, but sometimes this does not happen and the infant dies. If the infant has been exposed to nicotine, the risk increases. Another theory is that a respiratory stop may be triggered by the infant being too warm.

A new review of current research on SIDS has led to six pieces of advice for parents.

- Have your baby sleep on its back.
- Do not use nicotine.
- Make sure your baby's face is not covered, that it is moderately warm and can move.
- Babies under three months old are safest sleeping in their own bed.
- Breast feed your baby if possible.
- A dummy can be used when the baby is put down to sleep.

The first three items - having your baby sleep on its back, not using nicotine and keeping the baby's face free have the greatest impact on reducing the risk of SIDS.

Have your baby sleep on its back

Research from a number of countries shows that the risk of SIDS is reduced if you put the infant on its back instead of its stomach to sleep. Sleeping on its back is safer than on the side, since the infant can roll over from the side to the stomach.

Since the advice was first given for infants to sleep on their backs more than twenty years ago, SIDS has decreased by 85%.

If a baby lies on its back much, there is a risk that the rear of the head may be flattened. To prevent this, you can vary the baby's head position. Alternate between placing the baby's face forward, to one side or the other. This is one way of avoiding a constant pressure, which can result in a flat or oblique skull shape.

When the baby is awake, it is important to let it lie on its stomach to relieve the rear of the head, train control of the head and increase the strength of its upper body. Even newly born babies need to spend several waking periods per day on their stomachs under the supervision of an adult.

Do not use nicotine

There is a risk that the foetus will grow less if the mother smokes during pregnancy. The risk of stillbirth and SIDS increases with the number of cigarettes that the mother smokes. Nicotine probably disturbs the control of breathing and heart rate in the infant. There are good reasons for future parents to stop smoking. Since it is nicotine that is harmful, all forms of nicotine should be avoided during pregnancy and breastfeeding, including snuff, nicotine medication and other nicotine products. If you feel that it really is impossible to stop, it is important to know that the risks decrease if you cut down on smoking or the use of snuff.

Make sure the baby's face is not covered, that it is moderately warm and can move

The baby needs free access to air for oxygen. Keeping your baby's face free when sleeping reduces the risk of SIDS. The risk increases substantially if your baby's face and head are covered by a blanket or other bedding.

Babies should be kept warm but should not wear too many clothes. The risk of SIDS increases if a baby becomes too warm, so choose your baby's clothes to suit the ambient temperature.

The risk of SIDS is also reduced if babies can move freely during sleep. For this reason it is important that your baby can move its arms and legs when it sleeps.

Babies under three months old are safest sleeping in their own bed

Research results from several countries show that the risk of SIDS increases when parents and infants under three months old sleep in the same bed. If the parents smoke, use alcohol or tranquillizers, the risk increases even more. Babies under three months are safest sleeping in their own bed in the parents' bedroom.

When a baby sleeps in the same bed as an older person, there is a risk that the baby's sleeping position is changed from the side to the stomach, and bedclothes may accidentally cover the baby's head. Another risk factor is the baby's mouth and nose being covered by another person's arm, for example. So have your baby with you in your bed when you are breastfeeding and when your baby is awake, but put it on its back in its own bed to sleep.

Breast feed your baby if possible

Breast milk provides some protection against virus infections that can increase the risk of SIDS, so breastfeeding your baby is a good thing. Some studies show that breastfed babies do not sleep as deeply as children who are only given infant formula. They wake up more easily if they stop breathing for a short time.

A dummy can be used when the baby is put down to sleep

Different studies have found that giving your baby a dummy before falling asleep reduces the risk of SIDS to some extent. One explanation may be that a dummy helps to keep the airways open. Another explanation could be that babies who suck on a dummy (also called a pacifier) wake up more easily if they stop breathing for a short time.

If you want more information on SIDS,

talk with healthcare staff at your antenatal clinic (mödravårdscentral), birth centre (BB) or child welfare centre (barnavårdscentral).

Minska risken för plötslig spädbarnsdöd – Sex råd till dig som förälder,
översättning till engelska.
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