

Patient information from BMJ

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Sudden infant death syndrome: how can I reduce the risk?

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) is when a baby dies suddenly while sleeping, and doctors can't find a cause. It is also called cot death. Sudden infant death syndrome is not common and it's rare in babies more than six months old. But there are some simple things you can do to make it even less likely.

What is sudden infant death syndrome?

Sudden infant death syndrome happens without any warning when the baby is thought to be sleeping. It can happen when the baby is in a cot, but babies can also die when they're sleeping somewhere else, such as in a pram or in their parent's arms.

Babies who die of sudden infant death syndrome usually do so peacefully in their sleep and show no signs of pain or distress. There aren't any symptoms or warning signs. It's natural for parents to feel heartbroken if their child dies but it's important that parents do not blame themselves. In most cases of sudden infant death doctors never find the cause.

What helps reduce the chance of sudden infant death syndrome?

There are several things you can do to reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome.

Smoking

The most important thing you can do is not to smoke around your baby. Research has found that up to 25 in 100 cot deaths may be caused by babies being around tobacco smoke.

Don't smoke when you're pregnant. Sudden infant death is more common in babies whose mothers smoked when they were pregnant.

Being around people who smoke increases a baby's chance of dying. So keep your baby away from smoky places. If you can't give up smoking make sure that no one smokes in the same room as your baby.

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Cot deaths have been reduced after national campaigns advising parents to avoid smoking around their baby.

If you want help to stop smoking, either before or after having a baby, talk to your doctor.

Sleeping

Lay your baby down to sleep on his or her back, **not** on their front. Try not to put your baby on their side, as this makes it easier for them to roll onto their front.

The number of sudden infant deaths has fallen in countries where parents are advised to lay their babies on their backs to sleep.

Several other things seem to reduce the chance of cot death:

- Don't sleep in the same bed as your baby. Bed sharing increases the chance of sudden infant death. But do keep your baby's cot in your room for the first six months.
- Make sure your baby's vaccinations are up to date. Vaccinations offer protection against diseases that can cause cot death.
- Don't put pillows, soft toys, or comforters in the cot. The mattress should be firm with tight-fitting sheets.
- It's fine to let your baby sleep with a dummy. Researchers aren't sure why, but babies who sleep with dummies are less likely to die.
- Breastfeeding seems to make cot death less likely.
- Don't cover your baby's head in the cot.

Should I get a breathing monitor?

Some companies sell devices that monitor a baby's breathing. Doctors sometimes suggest using these for babies who have a medical condition that affects their breathing. And they're sometimes given to parents who've lost a baby to sudden infant death and who go on to have another child.

But there's no evidence that home breathing monitors can reduce the risk of SIDS and doctors don't usually recommend them.

Where can I get more help?

Parents who have lost a child to sudden infant death need a lot of emotional support. It's completely natural to feel grief and many parents feel guilty or that they should have done something differently.

Counselling, advice, and practical help are available. Many parents find it helps to talk to other people who've been in the same situation. Your doctor may be able to put you in touch with a support group in your area.

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