



## Rock-a-bye baby...on their backs

JAMA. 1998;280(4):396 (doi:10.1001/jama.280.4.396)

Online article and related content  
current as of July 9, 2009.

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# Rock-a-bye baby... on their backs

Dangers of infants sleeping on their stomachs and sudden infant death syndrome

SIDS

**W**hen a baby dies, not knowing the cause of death compounds the tragedy for parents.

**Sudden infant death syndrome** (SIDS) is the term used when an infant dies suddenly of unexplainable causes before age 1. In developed countries, SIDS (also known as **crib death**) is the most common form of death for infants between 1 month and 1 year old.

Although a variety of medical research has suggested biological or environmental risk factors for the syndrome, there is no definitive information about the exact cause.

Numerous studies throughout the world have indicated that babies placed to sleep on their stomachs (known as the **prone** position) are at increased risk for SIDS. Although the predominant sleep position of infants varies from country to country, most U.S. babies earlier in this decade were placed on their stomachs to sleep. In the past decade, the United States has joined a number of other countries in trying to encourage parents to place healthy babies on their backs to sleep.

Three new research studies in this issue of *JAMA* suggest that the message is getting out but much still needs to be done. One study from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (page 329) found that the proportion of U.S. babies being placed on their stomachs to sleep declined from 70% in 1992 to 24% in 1996. During the same period, there was an

approximately 38% decline in SIDS. A second study from the NICHD (page 341) showed that low-income, African American mothers were more likely to place their babies on their stomachs to sleep. The researchers determined that 93% of mothers who observed their infants placed in the prone position in the hospital after delivery placed their infants in the same position at home.

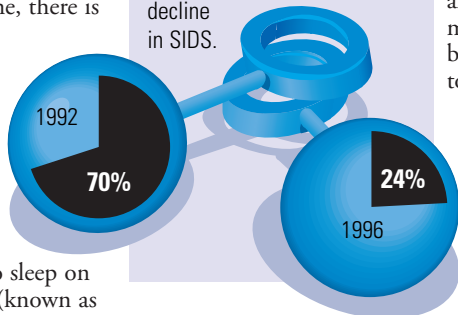
Another study of nearly 8,000 mothers in Massachusetts and Ohio (page 336) found that although only 18% of mothers placed their babies on their stomachs to sleep when their babies were 1 month old, a number of the mothers changed to this position by the time the infants were 3 months old, increasing the rate to 29%. The authors say the increase results from influences on the mother from family, friends, other children, and the infant's own behaviors.

The studies' researchers suggest that further educational programs to reduce prone sleeping be aimed at groups found to be at higher risk, including mothers who are African American or Hispanic, lower income, younger than age 29, have a previous child, or have infants who are younger than 8 weeks. The researchers also encourage hospitals to reinforce the correct sleep position by placing newborn infants to sleep on their backs while in the hospital.

*Additional Sources: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, SIDS Alliance, American Academy of Pediatrics, AMA's Encyclopedia of Medicine*

## Decline of U.S. babies being placed on their stomachs to sleep.

During the same period, there was an approximately 38% decline in SIDS.



## RISK FACTORS FOR SIDS:

Researchers do not know what causes SIDS. However, they have identified factors that increase the chances of SIDS:

- Babies who sleep on their stomachs
- Babies exposed to tobacco smoke
- Mothers who smoke during pregnancy
- Mothers who are less than 20 years old at time of first pregnancy
- Babies born to mothers who had no or late prenatal care
- Premature or low birth weight babies
- Cold weather months
- Baby boys

## WAYS TO LOWER RISK:

Although there is no sure way to prevent SIDS, possible ways to lower the risk include:

- Placing babies to sleep on their backs
- Good prenatal care
- A smoke-free environment
- Using a firm mattress
- Not placing soft materials like pillows or blankets under the baby
- Not overheating babies (with clothing, heavy bedding, or overly warm room temperature)
- Breast-feeding
- Routine checkups and immunizations
- Closely observing babies for several days after a minor illness

## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development  
"Back to Sleep" Campaign  
31 Center Drive, Room 2A32  
MSC 2425  
Bethesda, MD 20892-2425  
800/505-CRIB or [www.nih.gov/nichd/](http://www.nih.gov/nichd/)
- Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Alliance  
800/221-SIDS or [www.sidsalliance.org](http://www.sidsalliance.org)
- American Academy of Pediatrics  
SASE (business size) to:  
*SIDS Fact Sheet*  
AAP, P.O. Box 927  
Elk Grove Village, IL 60009 or [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)

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