



## Safe Sleep

### The Issue

Sudden unexpected infant death (SUID) is a death that occurs unexpectedly and suddenly in an infant < 1 year of age. Prior to the investigation, the cause of death is not immediately apparent. There are ~ 3,500 deaths in the US each year that are considered SUIDs. Two of the most common causes of SUID are Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed (ASSB).

SIDS is not the cause of every unexplained infant death but it is determined to be the cause when everything else has been ruled out. A death can only be classified as SIDS after a review of the clinical history, a complete autopsy and examination of the death scene provide no other cause of death. In the US, SIDS is the most common cause of death in infants aged 1-12 months.

ASSB is the leading cause of death due to infant injury and occurs due to suffocation from airway obstruction related to sleeping. Potential causes are: 1) suffocation by a pillow, waterbed mattress or other soft bedding, 2) overlaying by another person during bed sharing 3) entrapment or wedging between two objects such as sofa cushions or a wall and a mattress 4) strangulation when the infant's head and neck are caught between the crib railings. Many deaths that were classified as SIDS in years past are now known to be death due to ASSB.

### The Research

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) first recommended supine positioning or "Back to Sleep" in 1994. Despite this long standing recommendation, 25% of infants are still placed prone for sleep by their parents or caregivers.

In 2011, the AAP issued a new policy statement broadening their recommendations to include a national campaign focusing on a safe sleep environment. The recommendations called for active participation of health care providers in the campaign to raise awareness of the appropriate environment to promote safe sleep. Specifically, nurses and other health care professionals in newborn nurseries and NICUs were to endorse the SIDS reduction recommendations beginning at the time of birth.

Research has shown that parents are much less likely to place their infant supine if they do not receive education on the proper sleep positioning. In addition, parents often model the behavior they see in the hospital. When parents are told something that conflicts with what they see, they are much more likely to model what they see than what they are told.

### Current Legislation

Forty three states have laws related to SUIDs. However, the laws vary as to intent and scope. Most laws were enacted to set up SUID advisory councils or infant fatality review teams. A

handful of states require that a hospital or birthing center provide free materials or education on SUID prevention. Very few states, however, require healthcare providers to model safe sleep practices or provide additional education at follow up outpatient appointments.

Ohio is an exception. Ohio's Infant Safe Sleep Law took effect in May, 2015 and established one of the most comprehensive programs to combat SUID. It is intended to insure an appropriate sleep environment and proper education. As a result of the law, the Ohio Department of Health was required to produce educational materials on safe sleep, sample screening tools to identify expectant and new parents that were lacking a safe sleep environment for their infant and model policies for child care centers, pediatric hospitals, and maternity units. The law also mandates that a long list of healthcare providers, public agencies and other entities provide education to parents on the topic of safe sleep. The list includes hospital personnel as well as child birth educators and the staff in obstetrician and pediatrician offices. Ohio's law is one that other states should seek to emulate.

## Recommendations

1. Know the recommendations in the AAP's 2011 policy statement on a safe sleep environment. Educate parents and family members at every opportunity. Repetition often leads to results.
2. Always model a safe sleep position and environment for families, unless medically contraindicated. (Few infants are not able to be placed in a supine sleeping position.)
3. If your state does not have a law mandating safe sleep education by healthcare providers prenatally, in the newborn nursery or NICU, and at follow up visits, contact your state representatives and educate them on the importance of parental education in preventing SUIDS. Request that they introduce the much needed legislation.
4. If legislation is introduced in your state, contact your legislators and encourage them to vote for the legislation.

## References

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