

## **Sudden Infant Death Syndrome**

*The University of Pittsburgh  
Office of Child Development*

Daniel sleeps through the night, not making so much as a peep. You would think his parents would be well rested, but they're not.

They worry that Daniel will stop breathing. He is their first baby, and they recently read an article about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

SIDS, the sudden and unexplained death of an infant, is a source of anxiety among many new parents. It doesn't help that the precise cause of SIDS is not known.

But SIDS deaths are still fairly rare – about 2 babies die per 1,000 live births. And the number of U.S. SIDS deaths has fallen from about 5,000 a year in the early 1990s to about 3,000 today.

SIDS usually occurs between 1-4 months of age, and more often in the early morning when babies are asleep. Most deaths occur during the colder months of the year.

Studies suggest certain conditions may contribute to SIDS deaths, including blocked breathing, too much carbon dioxide, infections, abnormalities in the part of the brain that controls breathing and waking, and abnormal sleep patterns possibly due to central nervous system immaturity.

Babies who sleep on their stomachs, babies born prematurely at a low birth weight, and babies exposed to second-hand tobacco smoke are at higher risk. Chances of having a SIDS baby are greater among mothers who smoke during pregnancy, don't get prenatal care or start it late in pregnancy, and are younger than 20 when first pregnant. Even then, SIDS is not common.

Nevertheless, take some simple precautions. Have your baby sleep on his or her back and make sure that everyone who cares for your baby understands that this is your baby's sleeping position – no exceptions. But check with your doctor first. Another position may be better for babies who often spit up after eating or have certain health conditions.

A baby's face shouldn't sink into a mattress or soft material. Have your baby sleep on a firm surface. Don't put fluffy comforters or pillows underneath your baby or place stuffed animals or other soft toys in the crib. Never let a baby sleep on a waterbed.

Avoid bundling up your baby to the point where he or she becomes overheated. And make sure your baby receives all immunizations on time.

SIDS is tragic and mysterious, but fortunately rare. Talk to your doctor about SIDS and what precautions to take. Then, relax and enjoy your child's early months.

*This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.*