

# New SIDS Guidelines Expected to Further Decrease Deaths

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April 10, 2006



Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) claims half as many babies today as it did during the early 1990s — the time at which the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) suggested a nonprone sleep position for infants. Now, taking a more prescriptive approach, the academy intends to further decrease unexplained infant deaths.

“When AAP made its original sleep position recommendation in 1992, it implied side sleeping was OK,” says Catherine Ruhl, CNM, MS, associate director of Women’s Health Programs for the Association of Women’s Health, Obstetric and Neonatal Nurses. “Now, they are saying only supine is acceptable.”

SIDS kills about 2,500 infants annually and remains the leading cause of death among children between 1 month and 1 year of age.

The 1992 rate of 1.2 deaths per 1,000 live births declined to 0.56 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2001 and held at 0.57 deaths in 2002. The decline in deaths reflects a change in parental behavior prompted by the academy’s positioning guidelines and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development-led “Back to Sleep” campaign. The campaign, launched in 1994, heavily promoted the importance of back sleeping to parents and infant caregivers.

“The [SIDS] rate has gone down significantly,” says Andrea Bushaw, APN, CPNP, NICU step-down nurse practitioner at Children’s Memorial Hospital in Chicago. “It is still higher in the African-American population and in preterm infants. Nurses in NICU settings need to be aware of that.”

African-American infants are more than twice as likely to die of SIDS as white infants. In some parts of the country, the disparity is particularly dramatic. For example, for every white baby in

Illinois who dies of SIDS six African-American babies will die; in the city of Chicago, that number rises from six to 13. Again, the academy cites rates of prone positioning as the cause: 21% among African-American families and 11% among white families.

The academy recently released guidelines advising nurses working in neonatal intensive care units to place babies nearing discharge in the supine position. The guidelines also advise personnel in newborn nurseries to place infants on their backs as soon as possible because parents keenly observe (and mimic) the way nurses handle infants once they get home.

“Many preemies become habituated to sleeping prone,” Bushaw says. “It’s best in the hospital to let them get used to ‘back to sleep.’ Then when they go home, it is not so hard for parents to position the baby.”

Neonates experiencing respiratory difficulty aerate better in the prone position, so NICU nurses must position them in this way to obtain the best oxygen saturation, Bushaw explains. As babies grow and breathe easier, nurses should switch to positioning supine.

Bushaw also recommends that nurses not place quilts or extra blankets in the crib. Instead, they should limit bedding to a simple sheet on a firm mattress. Nurses must educate parents to avoid using pillows, soft mattresses, or bumper pads; placing stuffed toys in the crib; or bundling infants with extra blankets (overheating increases SIDS risk).

“It’s hard for nurses to remove stuffed animals and quilts from beds because parents want to make cribs more comforting,” Bushaw says. “But the idea is to set a good example for parents because they’re watching like hawks. You are the expert to them.”

### **American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) updated recommendations for reducing SIDS risk**

1. Always place a baby on his or her back to sleep during naps and at night.
2. Place babies on a firm sleep surface such as a safety-approved crib mattress that is covered with a fitted sheet.
3. Do not smoke during pregnancy or near babies.
4. Do not let a baby overheat during sleep. Always keep the head and face uncovered.
5. Keep a baby’s sleep area close to, but separate from, where parents and others sleep.
6. Offer a clean, dry pacifier when placing a baby on his or her back to sleep. Do not reinsert it after the baby falls asleep.
7. Reduce the chance that flat spots will develop on the baby’s head by providing “tummy time” when the baby is awake and someone is watching.
8. Do not use home respiratory or cardiac monitors to reduce SIDS risk.
9. Keep soft objects, toys, sheepskins, and loose bedding out of a baby’s sleep area.
10. Avoid products claiming to reduce SIDS risk.



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