

baby talk  
pregnancy through age 1

## the frightening link between SIDS and co-sleeping

By Debra Rich Gettleman

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I do not want to write this article. I do not want to even think about losing a baby. And I certainly do not want to tell a bunch of loving parents that one of their favorite baby bonding experiences is dangerous and possibly even deadly. But, like a lot of things in life, sometimes you have to do what you don't want to do.

So here goes: If you sleep with your infant in an adult bed you are seriously risking his or her life.

Look, I'm not an alarmist, and I swear I'm as interested as the next mother in bonding with my baby. But the fact is that co-sleeping has once again been identified as a key risk factor for infant death. In the November issue of *Pediatric News*, Carol Berkowitz, M.D., president of the American Academy of Pediatrics, says that many deaths previously attributed to SIDS are actually accidental asphyxiation deaths related to co-sleeping. In fact, Berkowitz notes, "most jurisdictions are now specifically evaluating whether infants were co-sleeping at the time of death." She also adds that, in some areas, all SIDS cases have been associated with co-sleeping.

In one reported California SIDS case, a 3-week-old twin was brought into the mother's bed to nurse and was discovered lifeless an hour later. "You could see the imprint of the mom's outline on the baby where they were in contact," Berkowitz says. "That's not SIDS." The cause of death was ultimately changed to suffocation due to overlying.

In another tragic case, Berkowitz describes a 2-month-old infant who went to sleep on her father's chest on the family sofa. Several hours later, the mother discovered the baby dead, wedged between the father's body and the couch cushions, with only her buttocks visible.

Parents just don't realize the risk that they're taking by bringing an infant into an adult bed. A joint study by the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that infants in adult beds died 40 times more often than infants in a proper sleeping environment. Forty times! That's an awful lot.

In another analysis of 515 co-sleeping deaths over a seven-year period, the CPSC found that 121 of the deaths occurred when a parent or caregiver rolled on top of or against an infant while sleeping. The other 394 deaths resulted from suffocation or strangulation caused by entrapment of the baby's head in various structures of the bed.

I hate to be so gruesomely graphic. But babies get wedged between mattresses and walls. They get strangled in bed frames. They get trapped between portable bed rails and mattresses. Then they die. The truth is, no matter how temporarily pleasurable it may be to snuggle up with your infant and go to sleep, the only safe place for a baby to sleep is on its back in a safety-approved crib without any soft bedding or pillow-like objects.

Pillows, blankets, and comforters, all of which populate adult beds, are known risk factors for SIDS. Adult mattresses are soft and compress easily. They are quilted with extra padding or pillow tops for comfort. And please, don't get me started on waterbeds. Anyone who takes a baby into a waterbed to sleep is just asking for tragedy.

Parental smoking, intoxication and obesity are other factors that increase the risk of death from co-sleeping. Before you declare it safe to sleep with junior because you don't drink or smoke, remember this: Allergy medicines, antidepressants and undiagnosed sleep apnea all interfere with normal arousal. Just one glass of wine with dinner can change a parent's normal sleep cycle, creating an elevated risk of damage to a baby. Even sleep deprivation, something that pretty much affects all new mothers, can interfere with arousal ability.

Proximity of the mother to the child in co-sleeping may also increase the child's risk of death. After nursing, many moms and babies will fall asleep face to face. At an average distance of eight inches, carbon dioxide levels from the

mother's exhalations are elevated for the baby. Berkowitz explains that babies are inhaling the mother's exhaled breath and that, too, may be a contributing factor in co-sleeping death.

Now, for the really scary part: It is estimated that up to half of all families in the United States bring babies into parental beds. That's a frightening figure given the risks involved. Sometimes co-sleeping seems like the only way for exhausted parents to get through the night. The truth is, there are other options, safe ones, that won't endanger your baby and will still encourage the close bonding so many parents crave.

Instead of cozying up with your baby in your arms in a big, soft adult bed, put your baby in a safety-inspected bassinet or crib next to your bed. Other options include "three-sided devices which affix to the bed so that infants and mothers can be in proximity without bed sharing," Berkowitz suggests. "Infants can sleep close by, but sleep safely." You also want to make sure your baby isn't dressed too warmly or placed in an overheated room – two other factors that can contribute to sudden death.

The facts speak for themselves. Co-sleeping poses a serious risk for infant death. Many deaths previously attributed to SIDS are now being categorized as suffocation due to co-sleeping. While autopsies cannot always determine whether a death is SIDS or asphyxiation, more precise determination methods, along with a history of co-sleeping, may provide important clues in determining an infant's cause of sudden death.

I'm sorry if this article upsets you. I know it's graphic. I know it's depressing. But so is losing a baby. Co-sleeping poses an unnecessary, dangerous risk and as far as I'm concerned, even one infant's preventable death is too many.

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