

ABCs of Safe Sleep for Babies

By Kathryn Sibley Horton

If you have a new baby, or are expecting one soon, one of the most important issues you'll be dealing with is sleep. Babies sleep a lot, but not always when you wish they would. Feedings, diaper changes, and needing comfort can happen anytime, day or night, and whether this is your first little one or your fourth, every child is different. So, make the best of those blissful times when your baby is sleeping. Get rest when you can, and always give your baby room to breathe for safe sleep at bedtime and naptime.

The **ABCs of safe sleep** for babies are easy to learn and easy to do.

A Babies should sleep Alone

Babies should sleep alone in a crib with no bumper pads, bedding, pillows, or toys, preferably in the same room as you. Share your room, not your bed.

B On their Back

Babies should sleep on their back—not their side or their tummy.

C In a Crib and Cool

A safe sleep surface is a crib with a firm mattress and a tight-fitting bottom sheet. Keep the room cool and dress your baby lightly, without a hat.

S In a Smoke-Free environment

Secondhand smoke is bad for everyone, and that includes babies.

When you put your baby to bed with the ABCs, everyone gets more peaceful zzzs.



Risks to Babies While Sleeping

You may wonder why there is so much concern about safe sleep practices for babies. After all, babies have been sleeping in cribs for decades. What's changed is that we know a lot more about safe sleep and crib safety for the baby's first year. We'll get to that later in this article, but let's review what you should know about current risks for sleep-related infant death.

There are many things that can increase the risk of sleep-related infant death. Here are a few of the big ones:

- Mom smokes or uses drugs or alcohol before, during, or after pregnancy.
- Parents share their bed with their baby.
- The baby sleeps on his (or her) tummy rather than his back.
- The baby sleeps with soft bedding, blankets, or stuffed animals in the sleep area.
- The baby sleeps on an unsafe surface, such as an adult bed or a sofa, where he can be trapped between a mattress and the wall, or in pillows or sofa cushions.
- The baby's crib is near strangulation hazards such as window blind cords and mobiles.
- A baby older than newborn (birth to 8 weeks) is swaddled for sleep.
- The temperature of the room where the baby sleeps is warm.
- The baby is overdressed for sleep.

Parents who are in-the-know can reduce the risk of babies dying unexpectedly in their sleep by following the ABCs for safe sleep until their baby's first birthday. It's also important to take your baby to get regular medical checkups.

About 3,600 babies die suddenly and unexpectedly in their sleep each year in the United States. We can help change that by using safe sleep practices for babies.

Tip

Car safety seats, strollers, swings, infant carriers, and infant slings are not safe sleep surfaces for babies. Always move sleeping babies to a safe sleep surface.

A Few Words About “The Way We’ve Always Done It”

Family traditions—“the way we’ve always done it”—may be one reason parents resist making changes. Grandpa loves to see his little sweetheart tucked in with his favorite sports team blanket. Auntie might be upset to see you remove the hand-knit hat she made. Traditions are often a wonderful thing, but some of them may put your baby at risk. As a parent, you can educate yourself and help any of your baby's caregivers understand and follow the ABCs of safe sleep. You can take charge of your baby's safe sleep and crib safety by remembering these guidelines:

- Bed sharing with thick blankets may have been common when Grandma had infants, but you have current information that room sharing, not bed sharing, is the best safe sleep practice.
- Babies won't choke while sleeping on their back, because their airway anatomy and the gag reflex prevent that from happening. Back sleeping actually helps protect your baby.

Tip

Babies sleep safest alone on their back on a firm surface, such as a mattress in a crib with a tight-fitting bottom sheet, free of other bedding or toys, and in a cool and smoke-free environment.



Share your room, not your bed.

Your baby sleeps a lot—approximately 16 hours a day, in intervals of 3 to 4 hours. Your baby will wake for feedings often. That schedule keeps you busy, so try to sleep when your baby sleeps, if you can. Want to cuddle with baby and drift off to dreamland together? It's a natural desire, but one to resist when practicing safe sleep.

It may feel natural to sleep with your baby, and you may feel you are protecting him when you sleep together, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that creates a greater risk.

- Bed sharing with your baby, also called co-sleeping, creates the dangers of entrapment, overheating, and suffocation.

- The soft and fluffy nature of modern beds and bedding does not align with safe sleep practices for babies.
- A sleepy adult may roll onto a baby.
- While you sleep, you cannot protect your baby from the risks introduced by co-sleeping.

Studies show that babies are safest when sleeping alone, on their back, in a crib in a cool and smoke-free room.

Room sharing is the safest way to be close to your baby while you both sleep.

This way you are close to each other but separated for safety, giving your baby room to breathe. Room sharing with your baby for at least six months, and preferably for one year, allows you to be close to your baby for easy monitoring and breastfeeding.

Position your baby's separate safe sleep surface next to yours, and you'll both sleep safe and sound.



Bringing baby to bed: is it ever okay?

Sometimes the night is long and the baby is crying. Feeding in the wee hours can seem easier in bed.

The CDC says to bring baby to bed only to feed or to comfort but not as a routine. Have safeguards in place, such as a buddy system or a timer, so you stay alert and return your baby to a safe sleep surface before falling back to sleep yourself.

The CDC recommends the following for breastfeeding moms:

- Stay alert while breastfeeding and return your baby to his safe sleep bed after feeding.
- If you accidentally fall asleep while breastfeeding in bed, return your baby to his safe sleep bed as soon as you wake up.
- Avoid feeding your baby in an armchair or on a couch when you might fall asleep with him. Soft surfaces can make it hard for babies to breathe because their neck muscles are not strong enough to turn their head away from anything that may block their nose and mouth.

Good to Know

Breastfeeding is a protective factor against sudden unexpected infant death, so the CDC recommends breastfeeding as much and for as long as you can.



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