



The Canadian Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths



Canadian Institute of Child Health



Canadian Paediatric Society



Health Canada

JOINT STATEMENT

Reducing the Risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in Canada

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) refers to the sudden and unexpected death of an apparently healthy infant less than one year of age, which remains unexplained even after a full investigation. In Canada, there are about 400 SIDS deaths each year, which makes SIDS the leading cause of death between one month and one year of age. Aboriginal infants have a risk of SIDS that is three to four times higher than the risk to non-Aboriginal infants.

Although the specific cause of SIDS remains unknown, we do have some knowledge of certain risk factors. The Canadian Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths, the Canadian Institute of Child Health, the Canadian Paediatric Society and Health Canada recently held a workshop on reducing the risk of SIDS. Experts presented and discussed evidence that babies who usually sleep on their tummy (prone position) have an increased risk of SIDS compared to babies who sleep on their back or side. Studies in England, the Netherlands, Australia and New Zealand report that when there was a decrease in the use of the prone sleeping position, there was also a decrease in SIDS deaths.

It was agreed that exposure to second-hand tobacco smoke is another significant risk factor. An infant who has been exposed either before or after birth is placed at an increased risk for SIDS compared to those infants who have not been exposed.

We recommend that normal, healthy infants be placed on their back or side for sleep and that they be cared for in a smoke-free environment.

Research from other countries provides evidence that babies who become too hot have an increased risk of SIDS. However, care must be taken in applying these results to Canada, as our climate and child care practices differ.

It is important for parents to know that while infants need warmth and protection from the Canadian elements, they also should not become too hot. Parents can be reassured that if a room temperature is comfortable for them, it is most likely fine for their infant, too. We advise that infants be dressed and covered in a manner to avoid overheating, even during an illness.

It was also recognized at the workshop that breastfeeding may help protect against SIDS. In addition, breastfeeding has significant nutritional, immunological and psychological benefits for the health of infants.

We recommend that all women be encouraged and helped to breastfeed their babies.

It is important to assure parents that normal, healthy babies do not choke or have any other problems resulting from sleeping on their back or side. However, there are certain health conditions that do require the tummy-down sleeping position. Parents should discuss their baby's particular needs with their doctor.

Older infants may be able to turn on their own from their back to their tummy. It is not necessary to force the back sleeping position on a baby who has enough mobility to find a comfortable position for itself.

It is important to emphasize that following these recommendations could reduce the risk of SIDS, but will not prevent all SIDS deaths. Since the cause or causes of SIDS remain unknown, SIDS parents should not conclude that their child care practices caused their baby's death.

The Canadian Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths, the Canadian Institute of Child Health, the Canadian Paediatric Society and Health Canada will be integrating this information into existing programs, as well as working on other strategies to disseminate this information to the public and to health professionals. These organizations will join with Aboriginal communities in a partnership approach to address this significant health risk to Aboriginal infants.