

County of Santa Clara Public Health Department



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DATE: August 16, 2010

TO: Pediatricians CHDP Providers
Nursery Directors CPSP Providers
Obstetricians Midwives

FROM: Maternal Child and Adolescent Health Program
Santa Clara County Child Death Review Team

SUBJECT: Notice on Infant Safe Sleeping Environment

The national “Back to Sleep” campaign has been a remarkable success in saving thousands of lives. Initiated in 1994, the campaign’s message has changed sleeping practice for infants. As of 2003, more than 70% of American families routinely placed their infants on their backs (face up) to sleep, and the incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) had been reduced by more than 50%.¹ Families and children in Santa Clara County have enjoyed the benefits of placing their infants on their backs to sleep as well; the rate of SIDS in Santa Clara County is currently very low.

Unfortunately, as the rate of cases classified as SIDS has gone down, the Santa Clara County Child Death Review Team has observed that too many babies have died as a result of being placed in unsafe sleeping environments. Over the past 5 years, while there were only six (6) SIDS deaths in Santa Clara County, there were *twenty-seven (27)* deaths of babies in which an unsafe sleeping environment contributed to the death. Fifteen (15) of these infants were probably accidentally suffocated by a co-sleeping adult, and 12 died on an unsafe sleeping surface or with unsafe bedding.

These infants died while sleeping on adult beds, easy chairs, and sofas, often with an adult sleeping with them. Some died entrapped between cushions, or simply by pressing their faces into soft bedding or pillows and finding themselves unable to breathe. Others were in an adult bed and were accidentally overlain by a sleeping adult. It should be emphasized that these infants died while under the care of loving parents, grandparents or other trusted caregivers.

The Santa Clara County experience is consistent with the national observation that infant mortality rates attributable to accidental suffocation and strangulation in bed have quadrupled since 1984.²

¹ See http://www.nichd.nih.gov/sids/upload/SIDS_rate_backsleep_03.pdf

² *Pediatrics* Vol. 123 No. 2 February 2009, pp. 533-539. Available online at <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/123/2/533>

While the reasons for this are not known, we do believe that many of these deaths can be prevented by safer infant sleeping practices. No family should have to suffer again the tragedy of an infant death under such circumstances.

When educating parents and caregivers, please continue to emphasize that all persons caring for a baby should be instructed to place the baby to sleep *only* on the back, and only in a crib or bassinette. Exposure to passive smoking or over-heating should be avoided. **In addition, we want to encourage you to emphasize the following points:**

- The baby should be placed on an appropriate sleep surface, such as a firm safety-approved crib mattress covered by a fitted sheet, with no pillows, quilts, sheepskins or other soft surfaces nearby. The baby should never be placed for sleep on an adult bed, easy chair, sofa or other soft surface either at night or at nap times.
- Infants under one year of age should not co-sleep with adults or other children in an adult bed, on a couch or an armchair, or in any other location where they will be at risk of entrapment, suffocation or accidental overlay.
- Breastfeeding should continue to be encouraged when appropriate. These safe sleeping recommendations do not interfere with breastfeeding.

These recommendations are consistent with current advice from the American Academy of Pediatrics³ and the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development.

Parents look to healthcare providers for parenting advice, and we have an obligation to provide parents and caregivers the tools needed to ensure the safety of their children. To assist you, we are enclosing a copy of the "Safe Sleep for your Baby" brochure which has been prepared by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. This document details the elements of a safe sleeping environment and may be used as a handout for families and other infant caregivers, as well an educational tool for healthcare providers. It is available free via the internet at <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/SIDS>.

If you would like to discuss this issue further, please call (408) 792-1393 and ask to speak with Teresa Folan, PHN, Santa Clara County SIDS Coordinator. Thank you for all you do to promote the health and safety of children.


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³ *Pediatrics* Vol. 116 No. 5 November 2005, pp. 1245-1255. Available online at <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/content/full/pediatrics;116/5/1245>