

This information sheet summarises research-based evidence about the risks and benefits of the most common night-time sleep environments for babies.

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Around the world, and throughout human history, babies have slept close to their mothers, during the day and during the night. Until the advent of advanced technology babies simply could not survive without their mothers.

Nowadays we are able to keep babies alive, warm, fed, and safe, without their mothers' bodies. How we incorporate babies into our 21st century world, and how we might adapt today's lifestyles to accommodate babies needs, are not things we often think about – but perhaps we should. Where we expect, encourage, and enable babies to sleep is just one of these issues.

Parents' room or Baby's own room?

Sleep is a developmental process, and our sleep needs change throughout our lifetimes. Waking during the night is normal during early infancy, and healthy babies experience several awakenings per night at the end of sleep cycles.



Having your baby sleep near you is associated with less chance of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, during day-time naps as well as at night, and makes night-time care easier.

Having your baby sleep in a cot in the same room as you until they are at least 6 months old is a key piece of advice given to new parents. There are two main reasons for this: Firstly, a number of studies across Europe, in England, the United States and New Zealand have shown that babies sleeping in their parents' room experience fewer sudden unexplained deaths compared to babies sleeping in a separate room.

- One study, that compared 745 SIDS babies with 2411 control babies across Europe, estimated that 36% of SIDS deaths could have been prevented if the babies had slept in a cot in the same room as the parents.
- An English study, comparing 325 SIDS babies with 1300 control babies, found that 75% of the day-time SIDS deaths occurred while babies were alone in a room.

There is no evidence to show that baby alarms, or movement monitors, prevent SIDS.

Secondly, many parents find that caring for their baby is easier when they share a room: Night-time feeding is easier; babies cry less when close to their parent/s; and both parents and babies get more sleep. Research suggests babies find separation stressful, even if they appear to be asleep.

Bed-sharing with parents

Babies sometimes sleep with their parent or parents. This has pros and cons that you should be aware of.

Many parents bring their baby into their bed to sleep, but for most babies this is not where they always or usually sleep. Bed-sharing mostly happens for part of the night, or for a couple of nights a week. Sleeping with a baby in an adult bed (bed-sharing) is common. Studies have found that around 50% of all UK babies have bed-shared by the time they are 3 months old.

- Bed-sharing is strongly associated with breastfeeding: 70-80% of breastfed babies sleep with their mother or parents some of the time in the early months, and many studies have found that mothers and babies who bed-share breastfeed for much longer than those who sleep apart.
- Other people bed-share for bonding, especially if they have to leave their baby during the day; others do so when their baby is ill, to be able to pay close attention; sometimes people bed-share because they cannot afford a cot/crib.

The latest NICE guidance advises parents that there may be an association between cosleeping and SIDS, particularly with parental smoking and possibly with cosleeping on sofas, after consuming alcohol or drugs, or with a low birth-weight or premature baby.

Falling asleep on a sofa, and some bed-sharing, can be very hazardous. It is important that parents think about bed-sharing and their individual circumstances even if they don't plan to do it, as dangerous bed-sharing often happens when parents fall asleep with their babies accidentally.

Sofa-sharing



Adults sometimes fall asleep with babies on sofas. This can be very hazardous.

Sleeping with a baby on a couch, sofa or an arm-chair can be very dangerous. Babies can become wedged between a parent's body and the back of a couch or the arm of a chair and the weight of the adult's body can prevent the baby from breathing.

The sofa is the only sleep environment in which SIDS deaths have increased in recent years, up from 6% in 1993-6 to 16% in 2003-6. This represents an increase from 24 to 42 deaths per year. This increase has happened at a time when SIDS deaths in all other environments have been falling (associated with parents placing their babies to sleep on their backs instead of their fronts). It may be due to an increase in parents

choosing to feed and settle babies on the sofa rather than in the parents' bed.

Think carefully about your baby's safety for every sleep.
