

Reducing the risk of cot death in pre-term infants



A guide for professionals

Scottish
COT DEATH
Trust

The Scottish Cot Death Trust working in partnership
with Bliss Scotland to help keep babies safe

Bliss
Scotland

for babies born too soon,
too small, too sick

Premature babies are four times more likely to die of cot death

Cot death, also known as SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) or SUDI (Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy), is the term used when an infant, usually under one year of age, dies suddenly and unexpectedly. Sadly, this can happen wherever an infant is sleeping.

The risk increases if infants are slept on the front (prone) or on the side.¹ If preterm infants are slept on the front, they have more central apnoeas and fewer spontaneous arousals.² This may contribute to their increased risk of cot death in the prone position.

BACK TO SLEEP

Preterm infants should sleep on their back – not their front or side – for one to two weeks prior to discharge. Parents tend to follow the practices of the neonatal units in terms of positioning their baby; therefore, it is important to establish back sleeping a couple of weeks before the infant leaves the unit, so parents assimilate the practice by the time they take their baby home.

The risks of cot death are significantly increased in infants who are placed on their side or front for sleeping.³ This should be actively discouraged in pre-term infants.

PREPARATION FOR DISCHARGE

Preterm infants require appropriate positioning and containment to improve neuro-developmental and neuro-behavioural outcomes.^{4,5 & 6} As preterm infants develop a more flexed midline posture and progress to full oral feeds, positioning aids should gradually be removed, and infants should be encouraged to spend increasing amounts of time sleeping on their backs in preparation for going home.

Back sleeping is recommended even if an infant remains oxygen dependent, although they may require more oxygen on their back than on their front.⁷ Infants with upper airway problems may, however, benefit from being slept prone, but this should be decided before discharge.

If there is gastro-oesophageal reflux, back sleeping does not increase apnoeas if the infant is asymptomatic.

ACTION POINTS

- Alert parents when the infant commences back sleeping.
- Always encourage back sleeping prior to discharge.
- During discharge planning, ensure advice is given to parents regarding the 'back to sleep' message.

DUMMIES

Many preterm infants in neonatal units will have used dummies to promote non-nutritive sucking while still requiring tube feeds. This helps prevent feeding problems and also acts as a comfort during painful or stressful procedures.

Once full oral feeds have been established, there is enough evidence to suggest that dummies may provide a protective role against cot death, and should continue to be offered at the beginning of every period of sleep (including daytime naps). Dummies, for this purpose, should never be coated in anything. Never force an infant to take a dummy. To prevent long-term problems associated with dummy use, it should be discontinued between 6–12 months (corrected age).

COMMUNITY PROFESSIONALS

When you visit infants receiving oxygen at home, please reinforce that they should be slept on their back even though they may need more oxygen. You will need to reassure parents that it's still better for babies to be on their back with more oxygen than on their front with no or less oxygen.

All professionals seeing infants after discharge should specifically ask how parents are positioning their baby for sleep and actively discourage front and side sleeping.

DISCHARGE PLANNING CHECKLIST

- Ensure parents understand that practice within neonatal units differs from care at home.
- Ensure parents receive the following leaflets:
 - Scottish Cot Death Trust/Bliss Scotland leaflet - *10 Easy steps to help reduce the risk*
 - Reduce the risks* leaflet
 - Plagiocephaly* leaflet
- Discuss 'Back to Sleep' messages ensuring that parents understand the importance of placing babies on their back for sleeping
- Raise awareness of increased risk of cot death in preterm and low birthweight babies.

The Scottish Cot Death Trust and Bliss Scotland are working in partnership to help reduce the increased risk of cot death for preterm and low birthweight babies



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