

Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

Sharing the Bed With Baby Can Be Deadly

Sharing bed with baby is common in some cultures and is becoming more popular in North America. On the surface, co-sleeping seems to make breastfeeding easier and is more convenient for tired parents. However, for years, health experts have been warning parents that babies need to put to bed in a safe sleep environment. For example, we know that putting baby to bed on his or her back can decrease the chance of crib death or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Unsafe sleep environments include parents' beds. Babies can be smothered by a parent and adult mattresses are not suited for babies. Also, in parent's bed a baby can become over-heated, a factor known to be associated with crib death. A recent coroner report indicates that in Ontario, between 2006-2007, there were 41 infants ranging between 11 days to 13 months of age who died while sharing their parent's bed. In fact, in almost 20% of these deaths, parents reported using drugs or alcohol. Nearly one-third of the cases involved breastfeeding. Let me set things straight though: this column is not meant to blame or discourage breastfeeding, but it is meant to warn parents and other child care-givers that co-sleeping with babies can be potentially deadly. As a matter of fact, along with putting babies to bed on their back and in a safe sleep environment, breastfeeding does reduce their risk of crib death. Yet another of the many benefits of breastfeeding.

My recommendation is that parents can be close to their baby by placing the baby's crib next to their bed. In this way they can respond to baby's needs immediately while not putting baby at risk. I do not think that this prevents effective breastfeeding or bonding with baby.

Since I am on the topic of safe sleep, let me give you some tips on how to make sure your baby's sleep environment is safe:

- In baby's crib, avoid soft bedding, including blankets and comforters, quilts, pillows, stuffed toys, sheepskins, and crib bumpers.
- If blankets are necessary, only one thin blanket should be used, and it should be tucked in so that it cannot cover baby's head. In cold weather, a blanket sleeper is an alternative to a blanket.
- Select a crib that conforms to the latest government safety standards and that has a firm and snug-fitting mattress. Beware of second-hand older cribs.
- Never put a baby to sleep on a waterbed, sofa or couch, soft mattress, pillow, adult bed or other soft surface.
- Avoid overheating by using light clothes for sleep and keep the room at a temperature of about 70°F.
- Do not smoke at home, as smoking has been shown to increase the risk of crib death.

Our babies are among our most precious treasures in life. It is worth every effort to make sure that their home and sleep environment is as safe as possible!

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