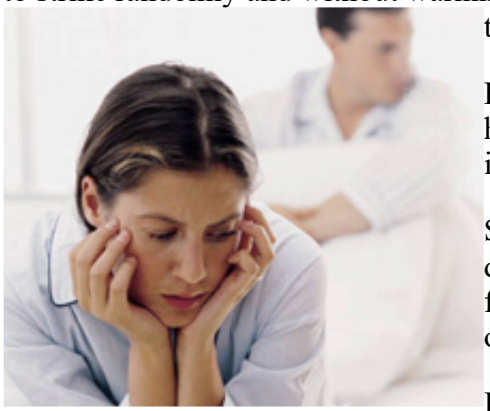
Understanding sudden infant death syndrome

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS, is probably one of new parents' biggest fears. Because SIDS seems to strike randomly and without warning, some parents feel there is little they can do to reduce the risk, and this heightens their anxiety even more.



Health Canada defines SIDS as the unexplained death of an apparently healthy infant that remains unexplained after a complete post-mortem investigation.

Statistics show that in Canada, three babies—or one in every 2,000—die of SIDS every week. The rate of SIDS is highest between two and four months of age, with 90 per cent to 95 per cent of SIDS cases occurring before the age of six months.

It’s important to note that SIDS is not caused by abuse or neglect, is not contagious or infections and is not hereditary.

If you are a new parent, here are some ways for you to reduce the onset of SIDS:

- **Put your baby to sleep on its back, not on its stomach.** There are certain health conditions that may warrant positioning a baby on his or her stomach. Talk to your doctor if you're unsure.
- **Do not smoke near your baby.** Do not smoke during pregnancy, and attempt to eliminate your baby's exposure to second-hand smoke before and after birth.
- **Do not let your baby get too hot.** If the room temperature is comfortable for you, then it should be fine for the baby. Avoid overdressing babies or covering them with too many blankets while they sleep.
- **Put your baby to sleep on a firm mattress.** Do not let the baby sleep on soft items like foam pads, waterbeds or pillows.
- **Take good care of yourself and your baby.** When you’re pregnant, don’t use drugs or alcohol, and see your doctor often for scheduled checkups.
- **Whenever possible, breastfeed your baby.** Breastfeeding has been shown to have a number of positive physical and psychological effects, and is the recommended practice between the ages of birth and six months.

Grief

All death threatens a person's sense of safety and security. This is especially true in the event of a sudden death of a child. It’s a traumatic event for the parents, family and friends. The suddenness of the death and the lack of explanation make SIDS deaths especially difficult to deal with, leaving a great loss and a need for understanding.

The sudden death of a child is a shock. Each detail plays over and over in your mind. Questions like, "Why did my baby die?" are normal. While there may be no known cause for SIDS, one thing is clear: SIDS is not caused by anything that a person did or did not do.

Common reactions/what to expect

After the initial shock, it’s common for parents to become depressed. It’s important during this time to seek support from friends and family. Many find it helpful to talk to other parents who have lost a child. There are support groups in communities and on the Internet that can facilitate this contact.

Many parents find it difficult to concentrate, making it problematic to work and make decisions. Sleep is often disrupted, loss of appetite is common, and upset stomachs or other illnesses can occur more frequently. Concentrate on taking care of yourself physically, as it takes a lot of energy to get through such a loss.

It’s normal for fathers and mothers to grieve in different ways. Women tend to be more inclined to talk about feelings, whereas men tend to grieve silently. It’s important to provide the space and time needed for your partner. Be sure to express what you need whether it’s time alone or a listening ear.

The first year after your baby's death will be the most difficult, particularly around holidays, birthdays and the anniversary of the baby's death. It’s OK to celebrate and enjoy these times. They will most likely be mixed with the sadness of loss and the joy that you knew because of your child. As special times approach, try to plan something that will help you celebrate your child and give you and your family comfort.

Children's reactions

The most important aspect of helping a child deal with loss is to help them feel loved and secure. Educate your children on what SIDS is, as children too carry guilt over the loss of a sibling. Surviving siblings need to feel that they are free to express their thoughts, feelings and questions about the death. Parents need to take the time to ask children about their feelings and openly express their own.

There is probably no greater challenge to a family's stability than the death of a child. The grieving process is difficult but having these things in place can help along the road.

If you’re expecting a new baby, be sure to educate yourself and others in your baby’s life on SIDS.

Talk about your feelings of grief, the reactions of others and your fears of the unknown with your partner, a friend, relative or a professional. And be sure to seek the help and support of a counsellor for yourself and your family, if required.