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Babies at Risk When Parents Use Soft Bedding

Health Professionals Warn Against Placing Babies to Sleep on Pillows

BREMERTON, WA --- This winter season, the Health District is urging all parents to take steps to help their little ones sleep safely. Making sure babies are “nestled all snug in their beds” includes making sure they sleep in a position that does not put them at risk for injury or death.

The Kitsap County Child Death Review Team, lead by the Health District and made up of specialized hospital staff, medics, law enforcement officials, and public health and other community agency members, reviews all unexpected deaths in children in the County. In 2008, the Child Death Review Team observed that the number of unexpected infant deaths in the county doubled from 2007 to 2008. These were babies between the ages of birth and one year of age that, in many cases, died during sleep. The Team found that the danger was the “sleep environment”: placing infants on pillows, couches, or in adult beds surrounded by thick comforters or other bedding.

“It’s awful, but we put babies at risk thinking we’re being kind,” says Health District Injury Prevention Specialist Barbara Smithson, who coordinates the reviews. According to recommendations from the Child Death Review Team and the National Institutes of Health, parents can take six simple steps to keep babies safer during sleep time:

- 1) Always place your baby on his/her back to sleep. The back sleep position is the safest, and every nap and sleep time counts. Side sleeping is not recommended.
- 2) Place your baby on a firm sleep surface, such as a safety approved crib with a fitted sheet. Pillows, quilts, and soft surfaces such as couches are not safe.
- 3) Soft objects, stuffed toys and loose bedding should be kept out of the sleep area. Don’t use puffy crib bumpers that could press against your baby’s face or wedges and positioners that claim to reduce Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

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- 4) Use sleep clothing such as a one-piece sleeper instead of a blanket. This will keep your baby comfortable. A loose blanket is risky because it can get wrapped around a baby’s head.
- 5) Don’t let anyone smoke near your baby. Smoking increases the risk of SIDS.
- 6) Don’t let your baby overheat during sleep. Dress your baby in light sleep clothing and keep the room at a temperature comfortable for adults. Overheating is a risk factor for SIDS.

The national “Back to Sleep” campaign in the 1990’s changed the way many American infants were put to bed. When a majority of babies were no longer placed on their stomachs to sleep, the SIDS rate decreased nationwide by an estimated 50%. The data represents progress, but not complete success.

“Clearly, babies must be on their backs to sleep safely,” says Health District Director, Scott Lindquist, MD. “We’ve been pretty good at getting out that message, but now parents need to learn that other factors can impact their baby’s safe sleep.”

Although sleep-related infant death rates have stalled overall, sleeping deaths by suffocation may be on the rise. The Consumer Products Safety Commission is aware of at least 47 infant deaths in the U.S. associated with pillow use in the sleeping environment between January 2006 and May 2008. In the 16 years between January 1992 and May 2008, pillows and cushions have been associated with 531 infant deaths.

Dr. Niran Al-Agba is a local pediatrician, a member of the Child Death Review Team, and has an infant of her own. “As a new mom, I truly understand how tired parents can get, and how tempted they are to do what’s easy,” she says, “but I also know my baby is totally dependant on me to put him in a safe environment to sleep.”

For more information on safe sleep for babies, contact the Health District, at (360) 337-5250.

Additional information is available online at www.kitsapcountyhealth.com.

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