

FAMILY RESOURCE

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“*The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants ride at a 45 degree angle in their car seats to prevent slumping and airway obstruction.*”

Infant Car Safety Seats:

A Potential Health Risk for Babies

Newborn babies should not sleep or be left alone in car seats, either indoors or in cars, according to a new study in the British Medical Journal. The consequences could be fatal.

The study looked at 43 infants in New Zealand who between July 1999 and December 2000 were referred to a hospital service that studies infants at high-risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Of those 43 infants, nine had suffered some sort of apparent life-threatening event while sleeping in a car seat indoors. When found, four of the babies were described as “limp and non-responsive,” according to the study. All nine were found either “blue” or “not breathing.”

The researchers then reconstructed the scene and figured out that all nine of the babies had been sitting with their heads flexed forward and their jaws pressed against their chests. This position, or this head flexion, narrowed the airways, making every breath a challenge.

Because “the infants [in the study] were very young [and their] head control is not well developed,” the study authors suggest that this head position is a potentially fatal one. Sleep poses an additional risk, because the throat muscles relax and make it hard to keep one’s airway open.

Half of the infants were children of smokers, and secondhand smoke is known to weaken a baby’s drive to breathe. All of these factors explain why a car seat can be potentially dangerous.

Car Seats Still Important Protection for Infants

This is not to say that parents should not use car seats. In fact, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), more children are killed as passengers in car crashes than by any other type of injury. We know that car seats can reduce injury by as much as

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90 to 95 percent when used correctly, said Michael Hayes, the author of a letter accompanying the study. Though this is the first study looking at infant position in car seats and death risk, the AAP has been recommending that “infants should ride at a 45 degree angle to prevent slumping and airway obstruction,” according to a 2002 policy statement.

Again, there is no question about the life-saving benefits of infant car seats, and no one is suggesting that parents abandon them because of the experiences reported in this study. Even if a semi-reclining car seat could pose some risk, the available information suggests that such a risk is truly tiny, especially compared to an infant’s very large risk of injury and death from riding in a car unrestrained. It’s also important to note that eight of the nine babies who got into trouble had fallen asleep in the seat when it was indoors, not in the car. This may mean that the infant was more upright, allowing his or her head to “fold” onto his or her chest, or that the infant wasn’t aroused from sleep by bounces that come from riding in a car.

Doctors recommend that infant car seats should be modified “so that head flexion is unlikely,” which could decrease the “risk of apparent life threatening events,” said study author Dr. Shirley Tonkin, a general practitioner associated with the New Zealand Cot Death Association.

In the meantime, until the design of car seats changes, parents should be watchful of infants sleeping in car seats whether in the car or indoors. The very best place for babies to sleep while at home or in child care programs is on their backs in their cribs. ♥



Mental Disorders Among New Parents

Postpartum depression is a serious problem affecting about 10 to 15 percent of new mothers. They may also experience more severe mental problems, though these are less common. “Postpartum” problems in fathers have been assumed to be rare, and there is little information on this phenomenon. To learn more, Danish researchers used national records to identify 630,373 women and 547,431 men who became first-time parents and then tracked their hospital or outpatient services for mental disorders in the months following delivery.

For the first three months following childbirth, the authors found no increase in mental problems for fathers. On the other hand, mothers were either hospitalized or needed outpatient mental health services more frequently, at a rate of about 1 per 1,000 births. The peak time of risk was at 10 to 19 days after delivery.

In an accompanying editorial, specialists in this area point out that this report, along with what’s been known before, “provides evidence to inform and support universal screening for postpartum mood episodes.” They also note that “screening should be implemented as early as two weeks after delivery and no later than 12 weeks postpartum to identify episodes of major mood disorder and other mental illness.”

The writers conclude that “mental health is crucial to a mother’s capacity to function optimally, enjoy relationships, prepare for the infant’s birth, cope with the stresses, and appreciate the joys of parenthood.” ♥

Resources:

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Munk-Olsen T et al: *Journal of the American Medical Association*, December 6, 2006, pp. 2582-2589.

Child Health Alert: A Survey of Current Developments Affecting Child Health Care, January 2007, pp. 2, 4-5.

Karalukulasingam, Jasmine, ABC News, *Don’t Let Sleeping Babies Lie—in Car Seats*, December 8, 2006.

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