



March 2, 2006

SIDS: Infant Assassin

By KARINA FLORES-HURLEY

There is no greater miracle than the miracle of life. Maternity is, without a doubt, an extraordinary phase in a woman's life, but it is also one full of fears. It was after the birth of my second child that I realized that I had yet a lot to learn about the safety and care of newborns.

It wasn't until recently that I obtained information from the hospital and was suddenly interested in learning more about the newborn's worst enemy: Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). This alarming condition causes inexplicable and unexpected deaths in infants less than a year old.

This syndrome manifests itself while the baby is asleep. Hence, it is often referred to as the "crib death," which does not suggest that cribs induce SIDS.

So what exactly causes this sudden death in infants? You would expect that by the twenty-first century and with thirty years of investigation, modern medicine would be capable of answering this question. Yet, SIDS continues to be an enigma in the medical world.

According to a study that was published in the American Institute of SIDS and was conducted by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Center of Health Statistics, the prevalence of SIDS in the U.S.A has decreased drastically since the 1980s. However, it continues to be the leading cause of death among infants one month to one year of age.

The vast majority of deaths caused by SIDS occur in babies that are two to four months old. There is no existing evidence that explains why deaths are more frequent at that age, just like there is no explanation for why the syndrome affects certain ethnic groups more than others. For example, African American infants are twice as likely as white non Hispanic babies to be victims of SIDS. Furthermore, the chance of Native American infants being victims of SIDS triples.

Although the leading global doctors and experts on infant care do not have answers regarding this mysterious death, they do claim that preventative measures can be taken during the gestation stage as well as during the infant's first year of life to prevent SIDS from occurring.

It is imperative that future mothers follow a strict prenatal program that includes adequate nutrition during pregnancy. It is also fundamental to avoid drug, alcohol and

tobacco use while pregnant. The experts also recommend allowing a year time span between pregnancies as a precaution to diminish the chances of SIDS.

If you already have your baby at home with you, there are various steps that you can take to reduce the risk of SIDS. The first and most important one is to place the baby on his or her back while sleeping.

One of parents' greatest fears is the possibility of the infant asphyxiating while sleeping face up. However, babies can automatically swallow and spit fluids. Additionally, there has not been an increase in the number of babies that suffocate due to sleeping in this position.

Infants should always sleep on a firm, solid surface and never on top of pillows or other soft surfaces. Make sure to also keep any objects or toys away from the infant's crib and sleeping area.

While it is common to let newborns and babies sleep in the bedroom, it is best for the infants to remain sleeping in their cribs. If you breastfeed at night, be cautious and make sure to place the baby back in his or her crib once you have finished. Do not allow your baby to get overheated. The room temperature and the baby's clothing should be reasonable and comfortable. Lastly, do not smoke and prevent others from doing so near your baby. Studies show that tobacco is most likely a major cause of SIDS.

There currently exist many organizations dedicated to the investigation and spread of information regarding SIDS and its prevention. Hopefully, within the next few years, new studies will finally bring forth the answers to solve this mystery. We will then be able to terminate this infant assassin once and for all.

If you would like more information and references to health services in your community, please call the Self-Reliance Foundation Helpline at 1-800-473-3003.