

Baby care - safety issues

Providing a safe environment is an important part of caring for your new baby. Babies need to be safe at home and when they're away from home. There are some simple things you can do to help keep your baby safe and secure. Always consult your healthcare professional if you have concerns about your baby.

Injuries to babies are preventable

Injuries are the most common cause of death in childhood beyond the first year of life and are a major reason for children needing medical attention.

Most injuries to babies do not occur by chance or by bad luck, and are not an act of fate. The majority of injuries are predictable and largely preventable. The term 'injury' is now used rather than 'accident' (accident implies that the event could not have been prevented).

By their very nature, babies are active, curious and often excitable. These are all attributes that put them at risk of injury. As a parent or carer, you can do a lot to prevent injury to your baby.

Keeping your baby safe

Make your baby's safety a priority. Some of the key areas you must keep in mind are:

- Take your baby home from hospital in a capsule or other suitable child restraint that faces the back of the car.
- Make sure your baby travels in a child restraint at all times in a vehicle.
- Provide a safe sleeping environment for your baby – this includes taking precautions to reduce the risk of sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI), which includes SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome) and fatal sleep accidents.
- Provide a safe environment at home.
- Check the safety of your environment when you are away from home.

Baby safety in the car

Babies learn from watching others. They copy what they see adults doing in the car. Make sure you act safely and do the right thing when you are with babies and young children.

Babies under six months of age must be restrained in a rearward facing child restraint when travelling in the car. The law states that children aged under seven years old must travel in an approved child restraint or booster seat. The restraint must be:

- an approved child restraint. When buying your child's restraint, look for the standard's sticker on the restraint and wording on the package that states it complies with AS/NZS 1754
- suitable for the child's age and size. Children need different restraints as their bodies grow. The restraint that you use must match the size of your child's body. As children of the same age can differ in size, age is only a rough guide to the correct restraint
- properly fitted to the vehicle. Follow the manufacturer's instructions. For assistance, visit your nearest child restraint fitter. For an RACV restraint fitter, visit www.racv.com.au
- adjusted to fit your child's body correctly
- purchased in Australia. It is illegal to use a child restraint that has been purchased overseas.

Other safety issues to keep in mind include:

- Your baby and any other children under four years of age must travel in the back seat of the car if it has two or more rows of seats. In fact, it is safer for children of any age to travel in the back seat. By law, the driver is responsible for ensuring that all passengers under the age of 16 are restrained correctly.
- Never leave your baby unattended in the car – not even for a short time. It is illegal.
- Even in cooler weather, the temperature in a car can reach dangerously high levels in a short period of time. Babies and children may overheat. On a hot day, your baby may just need a light singlet or nightdress when in the car. Avoid long car trips in hot weather.
- Use the restraint for every journey, no matter how short. Most crashes occur close to home.
- Develop good car safety habits. Always put your baby in and out of the car on the kerb side, away from traffic.
- Never reverse your car until you know where the children are.

Slings for carrying babies

If used correctly, baby slings are safe and practical tool for parents, but infants can be at risk of suffocation if they are not placed in the correct position in the sling, because they are not yet old enough to move out of a dangerous position that can block their airways.

The two positions that can cause significant danger are when the baby is lying in the sling with a curved back with its chin resting on its chest and when the baby is lying with its face pressed into the wearer's body or the fabric of the sling.

Premature, low birth weight babies or babies who are unwell are at greater risk and parents should talk to a doctor before using a sling.

The good news is that by following the 'T.I.C.K.S.' rule, parents can easily remember how to position their baby correctly. The T.I.C.K.S. rule for baby sling safety is:

- Tight – the sling should be tight, with the baby positioned high and upright with head support. Any loose fabric may cause the baby to slump down, restricting its breathing.
- In view at all times – the wearer should always be able to see the baby's face by simply looking down. Make sure the baby's face, nose and mouth remain uncovered by the sling and the wearer's body.
- Close enough to kiss – the baby should be close enough to the wearer's chin that by tipping their head forward, they can easily kiss the baby on top of its head.
- Keep chin off the chest – make sure the baby's chin is up and away from its body. The baby should never be curled so that its chin is forced onto its chest as this can restrict breathing. Regularly check the baby. Babies can be in distress without making any noise or movement.
- Supported back – the baby's back should be supported in a natural position, with its tummy and chest against the wearer. When bending over, support the baby with one hand behind its back and bend at the knees, not at the waist.

Baby safety in the home

Newborn babies have very little protection against infection, so it is important that you provide a clean, hygienic environment. One of the most important things you can do is to make sure that anyone who handles your baby, including you, has washed their hands first.

People who have infections, for example, colds, flu or cold sores (herpes simplex), should not come in contact with your baby. Cold sores can be particularly dangerous to a newborn baby. Vaccinations are available to protect your baby against some infectious diseases. Your maternal and child health nurse can advise you.

Because babies can develop new skills quickly, adults can be caught unaware and injuries may happen. If you understand a child's development, this will help you plan ahead for safety. Different risks appear at every stage of development and change takes place very rapidly in the early months and years.

To make sure your baby is safe at all times you should:

- Supervise young children whenever they are near the baby.

- Keep animals away from the baby. The change in the household when there is a new baby may upset some pets.
- To avoid serious scald burns, do not drink hot drinks when holding your baby.
- When you change your baby, make sure you put them down in a safe place, for example, on a change table with raised edges to prevent the baby rolling off. Remember to keep one hand on the baby at all times. Never leave your baby alone on the change table. To prevent falls, some parents choose to change the baby on the floor.

Safety for babies in the bath

When you give your baby (or child) a bath:

- Always supervise them in the bath. You should be within arm's reach of the child at all times.
- Do not use a baby support or bath seat to prop the baby up in the bath.
- Never leave an older child to supervise a younger child in the bath.
- If your telephone or doorbell rings, take your child with you.
- Empty the bath immediately after use.
- To avoid the risk of drowning, always keep the doors to the bathroom and laundry securely closed.

A safe sleeping environment for your baby

Many parents worry about sudden unexpected death in infancy (SUDI), which includes sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and fatal sleep accidents.

Research has shown that there are some simple things you can do to reduce the risks:

- Put your baby to sleep on their back.
- Breastfeeding your baby provides important immune factors, such as antibodies, to help protect babies from SIDS. Breastfed babies are also more easily aroused from sleep at two to three months of age, which is the peak age of SIDS occurrence.
- Do not have fluffy toys, 'bumpers' or doona covers in the cot or bassinette as they can cause babies to overheat or can smother a baby.
- Make up the bottom of the cot with blankets and sheets, like you would a normal bed. Place your baby with their feet at the bottom of the cot.
- Keep your baby's head uncovered while they sleep.
- Do not let anyone smoke in the house, in the car or around your baby.

Tips for baby safety in the home

- Prevent scalds in the bathroom. Reduce the temperature of the hot tap water at the basin, bath and shower to 50 °C or fit a thermostatic mixing or tempering valve.
- Use door barriers across kitchen and bathroom doors.
- Store medicines and cleaning products out of reach and in lockable cupboards.
- To prevent choking, choose age-appropriate toys with no parts of the toy smaller than a 'D' size battery. Check toys regularly for any small loose parts. Small parts can be a hazard and can choke a child less than three years of age.
- Avoid feeding your baby raw pieces of carrot and raw apple. Shred, grate or steam hard fruit and vegetables to reduce the risk of choking. Peanuts are not suitable for children under the age of five. Teach children to sit quietly while they are eating, and enjoy an unhurried meal.
- Be aware of foods that can choke children, such as lollies, meat and nuts.
- Keep cups of hot tea and coffee out of reach of children.
- Stay with children at all times when they are in the bath.
- Keep nappy buckets off the floor and make sure they have a firm, well-fitting lid.
- Place a fixed guard around heaters and open fires, install smoke detectors and practice your evacuation plan.
- Choose nursery furniture that meets Australian Standards.

Keep your baby safe outdoors

Make sure you use a baby stroller or pram correctly:

- Don't hang shopping bags from the handles as it may cause the stroller to tip over.
- Make sure you read the manufacturer's instructions and use the safety features.
- Always put the harness on your baby (even for short trips) to avoid fall injuries.
- Create safe play areas for children – separate play areas from driveway and roads.
- Children must be within eyesight of an adult at all times while outdoors
- Mulch, river sand, rubber and other soft materials can create a softer landing space in case of falls from play equipment
- Riding on tractors, mowers all-terrain vehicles (ATVs) and trailers is dangerous for children.

Remember to protect your baby from the sun and wind. A simple cloth thrown over the stroller may be enough, but make sure it's very light to avoid trapping heat inside the stroller. Sunshades can be bought from baby supply stores.

Where to get help

- Maternal and child health nurse
- Your doctor
- Maternal and Child Health Line (24 hours) Tel. 132 229
- National SIDS Council of Australia Tel. 1300 308 307
- The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- Kids Health Info (KHI) Tel. (03) 9345 6429
- VicRoads, Road Safety Telephone Information Service Tel. 1300 360 745
- RACV Tel. 137 228
- Consumer Affairs Victoria Tel. 1300 55 81 81

Things to remember

- Always put your baby or child in an approved restraint when travelling by car.
- Always use the five-point safety harness in your highchair, stroller or pram. This harness goes over your baby's shoulders, round their waist and between their legs.
- Put your baby to sleep on their back and keep fluffy toys and doonas out of the cot.
- Do not let anyone smoke in the house, in the car or near your baby.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Children's Hospital - Safety Centre

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