

WHAT IS SIDS?

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is the "sudden death of an infant under 1 year of age which remains unexplained after a thorough case investigation, including performance of a complete autopsy, examination of the death scene, and review of the clinical history."¹

In Tennessee, an autopsy is not required before determining SIDS as a cause of death. Because Tennessee-resident linked birth/death records were used as the basis of this report, SIDS deaths in the report may include cases where SIDS was recorded as the cause of death in the absence of an autopsy.

HOW ARE WE DOING?

SIDS is one of the leading causes of infant death in Tennessee, as it is nationally. The statistics in this report show that while the SIDS rate in Tennessee is decreasing overall, some population groups and regions in Tennessee are disproportionately affected by SIDS. Adequate access to health care and health education during pregnancy and at birth may be helpful in minimizing known risks associated with SIDS, especially infant sleep position and maternal smoking during pregnancy.

Areas of Concern. Although the Tennessee SIDS rate decreased over the period 1990 through 1998, there are a number of reasons for concern:

- The rate of SIDS was consistently higher in Tennessee than in the U.S. overall.
- The SIDS rate among black women was consistently higher than white women, particularly among black women with less than 12 years of education.
- Despite improving trends between 1990-1998, the rate of many strong predictors of SIDS remained high, (e.g., low maternal education (22% of all births), smoking (17%), and late or no prenatal care (16%)).
- Unmarried mothers, the most prevalent risk factor for SIDS in this study, increased from 30% to 35% of all births between 1990 and 1998.

Sleep position. The cause of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome is unknown, but a major risk factor associated with SIDS is prone infant sleep position. Infants who are put to sleep on their stomachs are more likely to die of SIDS than those put to sleep in the side or back position. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommended in 1992 that mothers be instructed to place their infants in the back position for sleeping. In 1994, the National Institute of Child Health and Development launched the "Back to Sleep" campaign to encourage parents to place infants on their backs for sleeping. Since 1992, the number of infants being placed to sleep on their stomachs in the U.S. has decreased substantially. The corresponding dramatic decrease of SIDS deaths in the U.S. has been attributed to this change.

Although information on sleep position in Tennessee was not available for this study, research suggests that most of the risk factors in this study are also risk factors for placing an infant in the prone sleep position.²⁻³ Thus, sleep position is an important area of intervention and education that should be addressed on a statewide level.