



**Bed-sharing  
and your baby:**  
*the facts*

## Settling your baby at night

Many new parents find it hard to care for a new baby during the night. There may be times when your baby is still unsettled after feeds. Skin-to-skin contact between you both can help to settle her. If you are breastfeeding, offering your baby your breast again can help too, even if she has just fed. If your baby cries for long periods, she may be unwell. Seek medical advice. If you are very tired it may be safer to breastfeed lying down in bed than sitting upright on a chair or sofa.

## Breastfeeding and sharing a bed with your baby

Based on quality scientific research, the public health organisation *Red Nose* includes 'breastfeed baby' as one of their six safe sleeping messages. Breastfeeding reduces the risk of Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI). Many parents find it easier to breastfeed at night while sharing a bed

with their baby as they are able to respond more quickly to their baby's needs. Mothers who share a bed with their baby tend to breastfeed for longer, both exclusively and in total length. When sharing a bed with her baby, a breastfeeding mother tends to form a protective 'C' shape around her baby (see images). This position, which many mothers adopt by instinct, helps to keep baby at breast level and stops him from moving under covers or into any other bedding. When breastfeeding next to his mother, the baby will usually be lying on his side. When he is not feeding, he should be placed on his back to sleep. If you think you may fall asleep during the feed, make sure he has room to return to his back after the feed where his face will be clear of your breast and any bedding. It is very important to ensure he has a clear face and head in shared sleep spaces to protect his airway.

## Sharing a bed with your baby

*Red Nose* recommends that babies sleep in their own safe sleeping space next to the parent bed for the first 6–12 months of life to help prevent infant deaths. However, it knows that many parents may choose to or have no option but to share a sleep surface with their baby. The evidence suggests that it is not bed-sharing alone that is dangerous, but other factors where bed-sharing occurs. Many parents find that bringing their baby into their bed helps them to care for her at night. Australian studies have found that 75–80% of babies spent at least some time sharing the parent bed in the first 6 months of life, whether parents had meant to bed-share, or not. It's important to know how to



Photo courtesy of Rob Mank Photography and basisonline.org.uk

make bed-sharing safer in case you happen to fall asleep with your baby. Adult beds were not designed with infant sleep safety in mind and may contain hazards for babies. There are also some cases where shared sleeping greatly raises the risk for babies and parents should avoid these.

It is not safe to share a bed with your baby:

- If anyone sleeping in the bed is a smoker or if the mother smoked during pregnancy.
- If you have consumed any alcohol or taken illegal drugs or medicines that make you sleepy. An Australian study found that alcohol or drug use was present in 70% of infant deaths involving a shared sleep surface with a baby.
- If you are very tired, to a point where you would find it hard to respond to your baby.
- In the early months, if your baby was born very small or premature. If their airway becomes blocked, these babies are more likely to suffocate, as they are less able to respond by moving.

In addition:

- Do not sleep with your baby on a sofa, waterbed, armchair, bean bag or other soft surface. Sofas are particularly dangerous and should be avoided.
- Do not let your baby sleep in a bed, on a sofa, bean bag, car seat or pram if no one is watching her.
- Never place a baby to sleep in a bed with other children or pets.
- Make sure every person caring for your baby knows about safe sleep. Makeshift and improvised sleeping arrangements are often the most dangerous for babies and most



likely occur when parents are exhausted or their baby is ill.

- If your baby is formula-fed, it is safer for your baby to sleep in a cot in your room.

If sharing a bed with your baby:

- Sleep your baby on her back – never on her tummy or side.
- If your baby lies on her side to breastfeed, return her to her back to sleep. Do not place items around her that may stop her returning to the back-sleeping position.
- Make sure the mattress is firm and flat.
- Make sure that bedding cannot cover your baby's face.
- Sleep your baby beside one parent only, rather than between two parents.
- Ensure your partner knows your baby is in the bed.
- Instead of bedding, a well-fitting infant sleeping bag may be used so that the baby does not share the adult bedding.
- Do not wrap or swaddle a baby if sharing a sleep surface.

References are available from  
[https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/  
breastfeeding-and-co-sleeping](https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bfinfo/breastfeeding-and-co-sleeping)

## Contacts

To obtain copies contact:

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**Breastfeeding Helpline**  
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