



# Safe to Sleep

A preventable cause of infant death is a priority for EVMS' Brock Institute

"They don't cry; they just die."

It's a harsh statement that Wendy Gunther, MD, Assistant Chief Medical Examiner for the Virginia Department of Health, repeats whenever she has an ear to listen.

According to data collected by Virginia's Child Fatality Review Team, sleep-related death is the second leading cause of infant mortality in Virginia. And nearly all of those deaths are preventable.

In Hampton Roads, the local Child Fatality Team reports that 25 infants suffocated in their sleep in 2012, up from 14 suffocation deaths in 2011. Among the causes are bedding that's too soft and

cushions or bumpers that babies get wedged in, along with co-sleeping with parents, falling asleep while holding a baby and putting infants to bed on their stomachs.

This jump is disturbing in the wake of the national "Back to Sleep" campaign that taught parents to put babies to sleep on their backs. As a result of this education, deaths from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) dropped by more than 50 percent nationwide over 10 years. Experts now attribute the rise in SIDS deaths in Virginia and several other states to the unsafe-sleep practices that can cause suffocation.

**WARNING!**  
**FOR SAFE SLEEP: PLACE BABY ON BACK ON FIRM MATTRESS.**  
**Keep all soft objects, toys and loose bedding out of baby's sleep area.**



## Numbers show why they die

The Virginia State Child Fatality Review Team examined the deaths of all 119 infants who died in a sleep environment in 2009. The team determined that 95 percent were definitely or probably preventable, and 90 percent were related to an unsafe sleeping environment.

**60 percent** were found on their stomachs

**57 percent** were bed-sharing with an adult

**36 percent** were found partially obstructed by soft bedding, objects or other people

**71 percent** were exposed to second-hand smoke

**28 percent** were born prematurely

**50 percent** of the mothers smoked while pregnant

**One in five** mothers used/abused substances while pregnant

**Black infants died at a rate twice that of white infants**

To combat the problem, a new national campaign called “Safe to Sleep” has expanded on the American Academy of Pediatrics’ original guidance of putting babies to sleep on their backs on a firm mattress. Now parents and caregivers are advised to keep pillows, blankets, crib bumpers, soft objects and toys out of the crib, as well as not to co-sleep with infants.

No one is more concerned about the upswing in preventable infant deaths than pediatrician Karen Remley, MD, MBA, Founding Director of the EVMS M. Foscue Brock Institute for Community and Global Health. In fact, she has made it one of the Brock Institute’s first priorities.

EVMS is taking a lead role in the region’s Safe Sleep Education Collaborative. The collaborative also includes Sentara Healthcare, Children’s Hospital of The King’s Daughters, Eastern Virginia Regional Fetal and Infant Mortality Review, Hampton Roads Regional Child Fatality Review Team and Tidewater Perinatal Council.

Working closely with Dr. Remley to promote “Safe to Sleep” are EVMS Assistant Professor of Pediatrics Michael Strunc, MD, who is also Director of the

Center for Pediatric Sleep Medicine at Children’s Hospital of The King’s Daughters; and Dr. Gunther, who says she has performed too many autopsies on babies whose deaths could have been prevented.

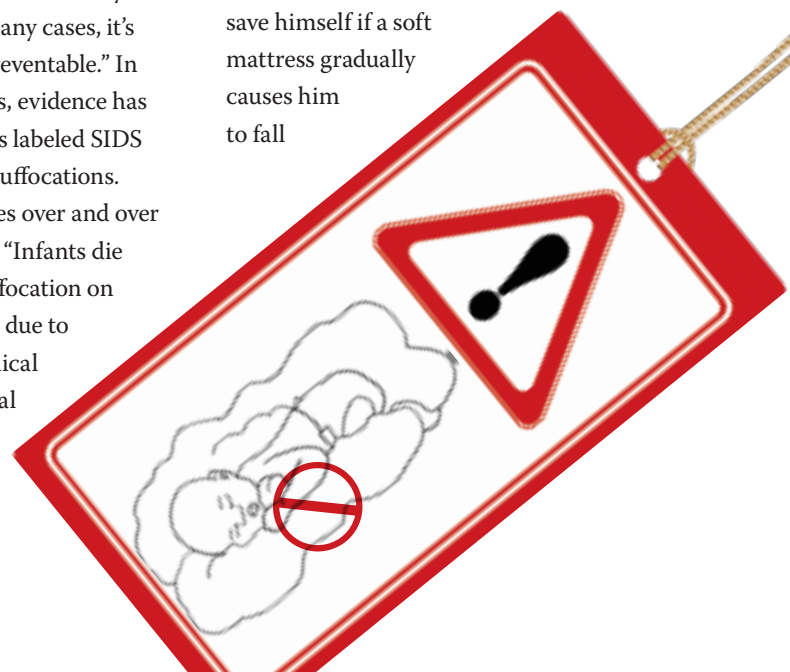
“Many people think that SIDS has been beaten, that the Back to Sleep campaign has taken care of it,” Dr. Gunther says. “As a medical examiner, I can say that they couldn’t be more wrong. Sudden, unexpected death in infancy is ever present. And in many cases, it’s completely and totally preventable.” In the past 10 years, she says, evidence has revealed that most deaths labeled SIDS were, in fact, accidental suffocations.

“I hear the same stories over and over again,” Dr. Gunther says. “Infants die much too easily from suffocation on unsafe sleep surfaces. It’s due to a combination of anatomical factors and environmental problems. Before they’re old enough to eat cereal, babies are designed by nature

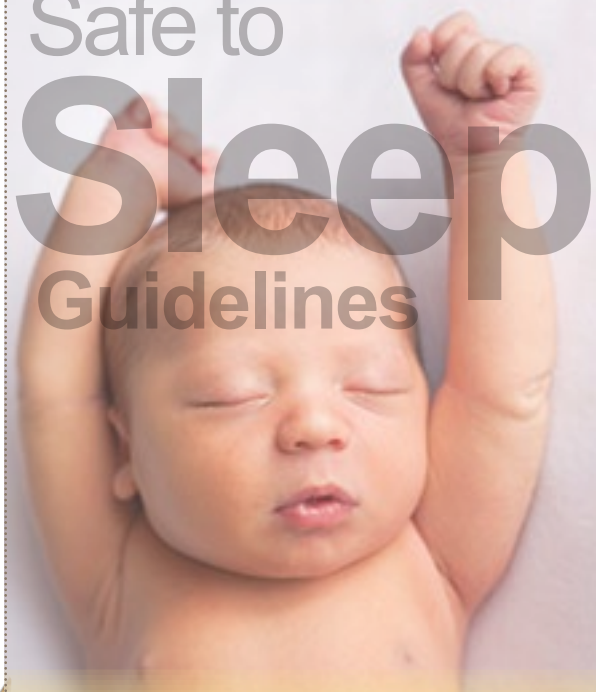
to breathe only through their noses while they’re asleep.”

Infants don’t cry to alert their parents they’re in

trouble, she explains. If a soft pillow or an adult mattress blocks the baby’s nose, death comes swiftly — often in a matter of minutes. An infant under six weeks old can’t raise her head out of a suffocating surface. A swaddled infant asleep on his side can’t save himself if a soft mattress gradually causes him to fall



# Safe to Sleep Guidelines



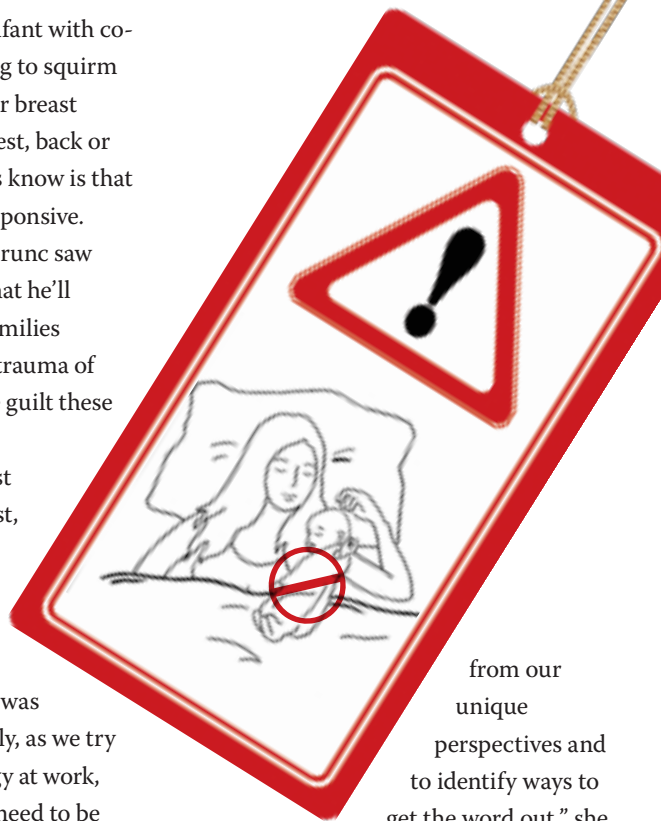
forward onto his face. An infant with co-sleeping parents is too young to squirm when a parent's arm, knee or breast overlies the infant's face, chest, back or belly. The first thing parents know is that their child is blue and unresponsive.

Early in his career, Dr. Strunc saw preventable infant deaths that he'll never forget. "I witnessed families disintegrate because of the trauma of losing a child," he says. "The guilt these parents feel is devastating."

As a pediatric neurologist and sleep medicine specialist, Dr. Strunc works with his colleagues in pediatrics to decrease the rate of these devastating deaths. "We thought that 'Back to Sleep' was the main message, but clearly, as we try to understand the physiology at work, there are other factors that need to be addressed."

Because there is no one clear reason for the rise in preventable infant deaths, Dr. Remley encourages every physician or health professional to promote safe sleep practices.

"We all need to look at the problem



from our unique perspectives and to identify ways to get the word out," she

says. "For instance, my husband is a cardiologist who treats many proud grandfathers who show him pictures of their grandchildren. That provides the perfect opportunity for him to say, 'Did you know that babies need to sleep in a crib and on their backs?'" □

- 1** Use a firm sleep surface, such as a mattress in a safety-approved crib, covered by a fitted sheet.
- 2** Do not use pillows, blankets or crib bumpers anywhere in your baby's sleep area.
- 3** Make sure nothing covers the baby's head.
- 4** Keep soft objects, toys and loose bedding out of your baby's sleep area.
- 5** Always place your baby on his or her back to sleep for naps and at night.
- 6** Dress your baby in light sleep clothing, such as a one-piece sleeper, and do not use a blanket.
- 7** Do not let your baby sleep in an adult bed, on a couch or on a chair — alone or otherwise.
- 8** Keep your baby close to you, such as in a bedside bassinet; babies who sleep in the same room with a parent or caregiver have a lower risk of death.
- 9** Make sure that everyone who cares for your baby — including grandparents and babysitters — follows these rules.