

Co-Sleeping is Not the Reason for High Infant Mortality Rates in the U.S.

It is not news that the United States has worse infant outcomes than other developed and affluent nations, but a new study has found that to be true even for babies born full term. Recent reports on the state of women's health care in the U.S. have confirmed again and again that the standard model of care for pregnant women in this country is lacking. Neha Bairoliya of the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies, one of the co-authors of the recent study, identified two factors in the higher infant mortality rates in the U.S., "...congenital malformations, which patients cannot really do much about other than ensuring adequate screening during pregnancy, and high risk of sudden unexpected deaths in infancy, which should largely be preventable through appropriate sleeping arrangements...We also found a shockingly large number of babies dying from suffocation, which suggests that parents either use covers that are not safe, or let children sleep in their own beds."

These observations highlight what is a big misconception in conventional healthcare in the U.S. – issues from co-sleeping are a symptom, not the problem.

image credit: *Mom Loses Custody Of Her Kids Because Of Something You've Probably Done*

Cosleeping and Infant Mortality

The most prevalent cause of infant death identified in the study was SUID (Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy), a categorization of infant deaths where the cause can be Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, accidental deaths like suffocation or

strangulation, homicides, and sudden natural deaths. Several studies over the past 5 years have linked cosleeping to SIDS. So why are rates of SIDS and infant mortality so much lower in places notorious for cosleeping?

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Infant Mortality in Other Countries

Cosleeping is widespread in Japan. Often, parents are still sleeping in the same bed with school-age children. Yet, infant mortality rates in the country do not reflect the conventional U.S. wisdom. In Japan, less than 3 infants per 1000 live births die, compared with around 7 for the United States. Why?

We don't know for sure. We do know that the Japanese sleep on a harder mattress that's on the floor, two of the cosleeping best practices. They are also less overweight or obese than Americans, leaving a baby less likely to be suffocated by a parent rolling over in the middle of the night. Maternal smoking is drastically less in Japan, and more than 90% of women initiate breastfeeding. All of these are factors in reducing infant mortality rates.

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The Problem with Cosleeping

The conventional American lifestyle is very much at odds with the safest cosleeping practices. Roughly one-third of adults in the United States are obese, a risk when it comes to cosleeping. Cosleeping literature also cautions against using alcohol and drugs while sleeping with baby, and that warning doesn't even address the complications that pharmaceuticals could pose. Seven of every ten Americans are on a prescription medication, which disrupts the connection between mom and

baby. That connection is a crucial part of successful cosleeping.

The Trade-off

When done safely, cosleeping is hugely beneficial to both parents and baby. Both parties get more sleep, mothers are more likely to breastfeed, and research indicates that children who cosleep are more independent later in life. Touch and closeness are integral to the human experience, especially for babies.

It's infuriating that this study chose to concentrate on cosleeping as a key reason why the U.S. lags behind other affluent (and some not so affluent) nations when it comes to infant mortality. Cosleeping is the better option for your baby and for you but you have to be healthy enough to safely do it. This is the actual issue here. Why are so many Americans not healthy enough to cosleep safely?

Sources:

- *U.S. infant mortality high even for full-term babies* – Reuters
- *Cosleeping Around The World* – The Natural Child Project
- *Japanese Parenting: Co-sleeping For Your Baby's Health and Wellbeing* – Well-Being Kid
- *Bed-sharing, Co-sleeping, or Separate Sleeping?* – Ergo Baby
- *The vast majority of American adults are overweight or obese, and weight is a growing problem among US children* – IHME