

Safe Sleep Myths & Facts

*Jason Jarzembowski, MD, PhD,
Children's Hospital of Wisconsin*

MYTH: Co-sleeping is only a problem in Milwaukee's African-American community.

FACT: Co-sleeping tragedies have struck families of all races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Between 2005 and 2008, there were 88 infants who died in unsafe sleep environments – 37 percent were Hispanic, 30 percent were white and only 18 percent were black.

MYTH: Co-sleeping is only risky if the adult has been drinking or taking drugs.

FACT: Co-sleeping is dangerous even if you're not impaired. In 80 percent of co-sleeping deaths, the parent or caregiver has been sober and drug-free.

MYTH: People are forced to co-sleep because they don't have cribs or Pack 'N Plays® where they can put their babies.

FACT: Of the 23 infant deaths occurring in unsafe sleep environments last year, 17 happened in homes that had cribs or Pack 'N Plays that were not being used or were being used incorrectly. Programs like Cribs for Kids offer free or low cost cribs to families in need, along with education on how to use them.

MYTH: Babies are less likely to choke or gag when they're on their tummies.

FACT: Babies are safer on their backs. Your airway is in front of your esophagus. When you swallow, your epiglottis – a flap at the root of the tongue – flips forward to cover your airway and keep food or liquid from entering. When a baby is on his or her back, the airway is on top of the esophagus, so food and fluid run back into the stomach and not down to the lungs.

MYTH: Families in other cultures have historically co-slept without any problems.

FACT: This is not necessarily true or relevant. First, we don't have good data to understand how common co-sleeping was (we don't even know how often it happens in modern-day Milwaukee). Second, infectious disease was more common and poorly treated, so many deaths were thought to be caused by illness instead of unsafe sleep. Also, regardless of what did happen or is happening in other cultures and populations, what's important is what's going on here – infants are dying in unsafe sleep environments.

MYTH: Co-sleeping is beneficial because it promotes breastfeeding.

FACT: Breastfeeding is good, but co-sleeping is bad. Breastfeeding provides the best nutrition for your baby, builds his or her immune system and promotes mother-child bonding. But breastfeeding can make the mother sleepy, so it needs to be done outside of the bed – in a chair, for example – and baby needs to be placed back in the crib once feeding time is finished. Unfortunately, two babies have died already in 2012 because they were co-sleeping after breastfeeding.
