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New SIDS research suggests link to serotonin

Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) can be a devastating blow to new parents. Seemingly out of nowhere an infant can lose his or her life. Although SIDS research is ongoing, recent research suggests a link between SIDS and serotonin deficiency.

SIDS remains the leading cause of death for children age one month to one year. Although the rate of fatalities has decreased over the last two decades, no doubt because of increased awareness, there are still some babies who perish despite parents doing everything right in the infant's environment. This could leave people to believe there might be a biological factor at play as well.

Recently, a team led by a Children's Hospital Boston neuropathologist pinpointed a defect in the brain that could be responsible for some cases of SIDS. The findings were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in early 2010. The team studied the brainstems of 41 children who had died from SIDS; the brainstems of seven children who died of other causes; and the brainstems of four children who died after being treated for low oxygen levels, a condition thought to contribute to SIDS. The brainstem is the part of the brain that regulates blood flow, controls breathing, regulates body temperature, and controls sleeping and waking.

When the comparison was done, the research team found serotonin levels in 25 of the 41 SIDS infants were 26 percent lower than the levels in the children who had died from other causes. There was also a 22 percent deficiency in another enzyme that stimulates serotonin production. Binding to serotonin receptors was 50 percent lower in the SIDS babies.

Serotonin is a neurotransmitter, a substance that is designed to transmit messages from one nerve cell to another in the central nervous system. Low levels of serotonin can lead to depression, sleep disorders and various forms of addiction. Serotonin affects and controls mental and emotional processes, some motor functions, thermoregulation (temperature control), regulation of blood pressure, and some hormonal functions. Serotonin also plays an important role in the onset of sleep.

SIDS is a term medical professionals and scientists use to describe the unexplained death of a child under the age of one. In the past, SIDS was known as "crib death" because parents would put their child in a crib and return to find the child had passed away.

Although scientists are still trying to unlock potential biological factors in SIDS, doctors recommend controlling the environmental and physical factors that may contribute. These factors include:

- mothers avoiding drugs, alcohol and cigarettes while pregnant;
- keeping the house smoke-free after the baby is born;
- ensuring the infant is not overheated in his or her crib;
- placing the baby to sleep on his or her back;
- keeping the crib free of breathing obstructions, such as pillows, heavy bedding or stuffed animals;
- maintaining routine well visits with a pediatrician; and
- having the infant sleep close to mom or dad (but not in the same bed) so that breathing can be monitored.

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Who Needs a Flu Shot?

In general, anyone who wants to reduce their chances of getting the flu can and should get vaccinated. The CDC recommends that anyone over 6 months old be vaccinated. In addition, household caregivers – including moms, dads, grandparents, nannies, and other child care providers – should get vaccinated. However, due to regulations, we can only vaccinate adults 18 years and older.

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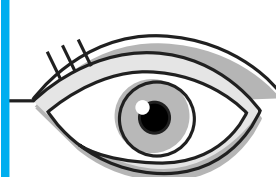
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