

SIDS AMONG AMERICAN INDIANS AND ALASKA NATIVES

ISSUE

American Indians and Alaska Natives have a sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) rate that is 22 percent greater than the rate for the whole U.S. population. Depending on location in Indian Country, the rate of SIDS is 2 to 4 times greater than for the U.S. population. SIDS is the third leading cause of infant death in America. It is the leading cause of postneonatal death for American Indians and Alaska Natives.

BACKGROUND

Indian families experience the heartbreak of losing a child to SIDS at more than twice the rate for other U.S. families. SIDS rates for infants of American Indian and Alaska Native mothers are the highest of all races and ethnic groups, and 2.3 times the rate for non-Hispanic white mothers.

While we cannot know for certain what causes SIDS, we can find correlations that may help us find a way to reduce or eliminate this tragedy. There are studies indicating that soft bedding may contribute to some deaths that are attributed to SIDS. Other studies indicate that abnormalities in the brain stem that regulate breathing, heart beat, body temperature, and arousal may also play a role.

It is well known that health status is related to a person's educational level, economic status, and access to health care. Therefore, as education level, economic status, and access to health services increase, infant mortality and SIDS rates decrease. And there are behavioral facts that influence infant mortality rates as well -- mothers who smoke have an almost 60 percent greater risk of having their child die as an infant. Delaying childbirth until reaching the late twenties and early thirties also reduces infant mortality rates. And something as simple as putting infants on their backs to sleep has proven to have dramatic effects in reducing SIDS rates. Obviously, it is important that prenatal care and health education are available to pregnant women.



SITUATION

The Indian Health Service (IHS) is working on several fronts to alleviate this cause of needless suffering and lifelong pain. On the medical side, the IHS continues to assist others with pediatric neuropathologic research of SIDS because it will benefit us all. There are many things that can be done to reduce the tragedy of SIDS - community wide alcohol and substance abuse programs, especially at the high school level; smoking cessation and prevention programs; and early prenatal care and continuing well-baby care, to name a few.

OPTIONS/PLANS

- The Indian Health Service, its tribal programs, urban programs and direct care programs are engaged with the tribes on seeking to clarify SIDS as it occurs in the American Indian and Alaska Native populations.
- Clinical efforts championing the "Back to Sleep Campaign" are the mainstay of well child and infant anticipatory guidance throughout the Indian Health Care System and as advocated by the American Academy of Pediatrics since 1992. Parent education at the time of discharge from the newborn nursery covers the back to sleep position.
- Infant mortality reviews occur at the local (clinical program level) and state level. Volunteer participation by physicians, nurses, coroners and other key individuals occurs at the state level and is vital to ongoing review of the myriad issues and risk factors that interplay around infant mortality.
- The IHS is planning to convene a meeting of key leaders in American Indian and Alaska Native communities to discuss strategies for SIDS outreach activities.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

For referral to the appropriate spokesperson, contact the IHS Public Affairs Staff at 301-443-3593.

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome Rates CY 1996-1998

