

Co-Sleeping Can Mean Danger for Babies and Parents

In May, six-week-old Evan Berney was smothered by his grandmother in Minnesota. She allegedly rolled onto him while they slept.

In August, two-month-old baby Lailanni Amkha died sleeping with her dad on the couch. She was the sixth Milwaukee baby killed this year sleeping with an adult.

Across the county, the number of infants killed sleeping with a parent or caregiver is on the rise. Most of these deaths are considered tragic accidents. But when alcohol or drugs are involved, prosecutors often see these deaths as a crime.

Bed Sharing Dangers

Throughout history babies have slept with their parents. The practice is called co-sleeping or bed-sharing. It's considered the norm in many countries. Advocates say it promotes breastfeeding and family-bonding.

But the danger of babies being smothered when bed-sharing can't be denied. Adults can roll onto the baby, the adult's movement may cause the baby to roll face-down, or the baby can get tangled in bedding.

A recent [study](#) by investigators at the [US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) showed that the number of US infant deaths from strangulation and smothering in bed quadrupled over the last 20 years. The data from 2003-2004 indicated that most of these deaths occurred during bed-sharing when someone rolled on top of or against the infant while sleeping.

Accidental or Criminal

Most of these cases are viewed as tragic accidents. Some officials say that baby co-sleeping is a health issue that calls for public education not criminal prosecution. During a two-year period in Philadelphia, 57 babies died co-sleeping with adults. The city responded by launching a media campaign telling parents to never sleep with their babies.

When alcohol or drugs are involved, prosecutors take a firmer stand on the issue. Last month, the Minnesota grandma, Tina Miller-Steiner, was charged with two counts of manslaughter in the smothering death of her grandson Evan. Police say she mixed alcohol with prescription drugs before she fell asleep on the baby.

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A person can be charged with manslaughter or criminal negligence for disregarding a substantial risk of causing death or serious bodily harm. A Georgia court of appeals found that this legal test was met in a case where a baby was smothered when sleeping between her drunken parents. Even though it was the father who rolled onto the baby, the mother was convicted of involuntary manslaughter for bringing the baby into their bed.

Difficulty in Prosecuting Co-Sleeping Cases

These cases are especially difficult to prosecute. There is often a lack of physical evidence and family and friends are reluctant to testify against the caregiver. A Florida man admits that he killed his daughter by rolling onto her in a drunken stupor. But he was acquitted of manslaughter last month after his sister failed to show up to testify that he was the one who put the baby in the bed.

Another factor making prosecution difficult is that jurors tend to sympathize with the grieving parents. Many feel that the loss of the baby is punishment enough.

Safe Baby Sleep Guidelines

The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends the following tips to help make sleeping safe for your baby:

- **Back to sleep.** Lay your baby on its back to sleep, not its side or tummy.
- **Separate but close.** Put your baby to sleep in its own crib or bassinet. Keep it near the parents' bed to make breastfeeding and cuddling easy. Babies shouldn't sleep with a sibling, parent or caregiver.
- **No cuddling on drugs or alcohol.** Never bring a baby into your bed if you are overly tired or you are using drugs or alcohol that could impair your alertness.
- **Firm sleep surface.** A crib mattress covered only with a sheet is best. Babies shouldn't sleep on couches, chairs, adult beds or other soft surfaces.

- **No soft bedding.** Keep pillows, sheepskins, and stuffed toys out of the crib.
- **No loose blankets.** Secure blankets so they don't cover your baby's face. Better yet, use infant sleepwear or sleep sacks for warmth.
- **Avoid overheating.** Your baby may be too hot if you see flushed cheeks, damp hair, or sweating.
- **No smoking.** Don't smoke during pregnancy. Put your baby down to sleep in a smoke-free room.

You can learn more about safe sleep practices for infants at the [American Academy of Pediatrics website](#). Follow these tips, and make sure family members and other caregivers follow them too, to keep your baby safe