

How breastfeeding helps protect against Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI) and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)

The **importance** of breastfeeding for maternal and child health is undisputed. Breastfeeding helps protect babies against infections (eg gastrointestinal, respiratory and ear) and reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancer for mothers. In addition, breastfeeding has been shown to reduce the risk of Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI). This article discusses what the research says regarding breastfeeding and SUDI and to what extent and the ways breastfeeding might be protective.

Red Nose Australia, the Australian Breastfeeding Association and the **National Health and Medical Research Council** support the **World Health Organization's** global public health recommendation that babies should be exclusively breastfed for the first 6 months to support optimal growth, development and health. Introduction of solid foods to healthy babies should start around 6 months, while breastfeeding continues ideally to at least 2 years of age or beyond, with an appropriate intake of solid food.

What does the research say?

Different types of scientific studies form a **hierarchy of evidence**. The highest level of scientific evidence comes from research which summarises the best quality evidence available on a topic. Sometimes the data within individual studies are similar enough so that they can be pooled together. This type of research has consistently found a strong link between breastfeeding and a reduced risk of SUDI and SIDS.

In 2012, after the publication of these key systematic reviews, the Red Nose National Scientific Advisory Group supported the decision that a critical scientific threshold had been reached that breastfeeding is a specific protective factor against SIDS. This resulted in a sixth recommendation, 'Breastfeed baby', being added to the list of Red Nose's **safe sleep recommendations**.

You can read more about the evidence showing how breastfeeding reduces the risk of SIDS [here](#).

Red Nose and the Australian Breastfeeding Association support the Australian Government commitment to protecting, promoting and supporting exclusive breastfeeding to around 6 months and continued breastfeeding thereafter.

For more information, visit the [Red Nose website](#) and see the Australian Breastfeeding Association's **Breastfeeding and co-sleeping** webpage.

To what extent does breastfeeding help protect against SIDS?

As **Red Nose Australia** states, 'any duration of breastfeeding is protective against sudden infant death, while the protective effect is stronger for exclusive breastfeeding over a longer period of time'. Some reports have concluded that the risk of SIDS is 56% higher among infants who were never breastfed and others have suggested that, at each age, the risk of SIDS is reduced by half for the baby who is being breastfed.

How might breastfeeding help protect against SIDS?

There are several possible mechanisms as to how breastfeeding may help protect against SIDS. For example:

- **Breastmilk:** Breastfeeding provides babies with important immune protective factors that help protect breastfed babies against infections. Some babies whose deaths are attributed to SIDS have had a minor infection in the days preceding death that was not considered sufficient alone to have caused death. In fact, babies whose deaths were attributed to SIDS were 45 to 80% more **likely** to have had an infection in the 2 weeks before death.
- **Mother:** Breastfeeding mothers are more aware and responsive to their baby's behavioural cues that impact their baby's sleep and arousal patterns in potentially protective ways, particularly when room sharing. Mothers are able to intervene and move their babies into a position of safety in their cot or bassinet should baby roll or move into an unsafe sleeping position. The hormones produced during breastfeeding prolactin and oxytocin, also help women **adapt** to their role as a mother.
- **Method:** Breastfed babies are more easily **aroused** from sleep than formula-fed babies at 2 to 3 months of age, which is within the 2 to 4 month peak age during which SUDI occurs. So, whilst waking at night can be exhausting, it's also a factor in helping to protect against Sudden Unexplained Infant Death.



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