Sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) – sometimes known as cot death – is the sudden, unexpected and unexplained death of an apparently healthy baby.

SIDS is rare and the risk of your baby dying from it is low.

SIDS can affect babies aged up to 12 months old. Most deaths happen during the first 6 months of a baby's life.

Infants born prematurely or with a low birthweight are at greater risk. SIDS also tends to be slightly more common in baby boys.

SIDS usually occurs when a baby is asleep, although it can occasionally happen while they're awake.

Parents can reduce the risk of SIDS by not smoking while pregnant or after the baby is born, and always placing the baby on their back when they sleep.

The exact cause of SIDS is unknown, but it's thought to be down to a combination of factors.

Experts believe SIDS occurs at a particular stage in a baby's development and that it affects babies vulnerable to certain environmental stresses.

This vulnerability may be caused by being born prematurely or having a low birthweight, or because of other reasons that have not been identified yet.

Environmental stresses could include tobacco smoke, getting tangled in bedding, a minor illness or a breathing obstruction. There's also an association between sleeping with your baby on a sofa or chair and SIDS.

Babies who die of SIDS are thought to have problems in the way they respond to these stresses and how they regulate their heart rate, breathing and temperature.

Although the cause of SIDS is not fully understood, there are a number of things you can do to reduce the risk.

What can I do to help prevent SIDS?

* always place your baby on their back to sleep
* place your baby in the "feet to foot" position – with their feet touching the end of the cot, Moses basket or pram
* keep your baby's head uncovered – tuck your baby's blanket securely under their arms so the blanket cannot move and cover their head
* keep your baby, or any baby you're caring for, in the same room as you while they're sleeping until they're at least 6 months old
* make sure there are no pillows or duvets near your baby if you share a bed with them
* keep other children and pets out of the bed if you share a bed with your baby
* use a mattress that's firm, flat, waterproof and in good condition
* breastfeed your baby
* make sure you use a sling or baby-carrier safely
* do not share a bed with your baby if you or your partner smoke or take recreational drugs, have had 2 or more units of alcohol or have taken medicine that causes drowsiness
* do not share a bed with your baby if they weighed under 2.5kg when they were born
* do not smoke during pregnancy or let anyone smoke in the same room as your baby – both before and after birth
* do not sleep on a sofa or armchair with your baby
* do not let your baby get too hot or too cold – a room temperature of 16C to 20C, with light bedding or a lightweight baby sleeping bag, will provide a comfortable sleeping environment for your baby