

Twins and multiples - the research

The risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) among twins and higher-order multiples has been examined in several epidemiological studies. Across different populations, the risk of SIDS in twins and higher-order multiples is approximately twice that of singleton births^{1,2}. However, this increased risk may largely reflect the higher rates of low birthweight and prematurity among multiples; 95% of triplets, for example, are born prematurely and with low birthweight. In a large U.S. study of nearly 25,000 SIDS cases between 1987 and 1991, twins had a comparable risk of SIDS to singletons once birthweight was accounted for³.

Parents of twins typically choose between co-bedding (having the babies sleep together) and providing separate sleeping spaces⁴. A systematic review in 2022 summarised the available evidence on twins co-bedding. The authors found studies from Australia, the UK, the USA, New Zealand, Iran, Canada, Sweden, France and Japan. Overall, the review concluded that there were potential benefits from co-bedding, though recommended larger studies for clarity⁵.

Specifically considering twins in hospital, three included studies that compared cardio-respiratory outcomes between co-bedded and individually bedded twins, finding no difference in heart rate or oxygen saturation levels⁶⁻⁹. Two studies found improvements in apnoea rates^{7,9}. Three studies looked at recovery from pain after a procedure, all finding a small but significant difference between co-bedded and individually bedded infants¹⁰⁻¹². Two studies found no difference in rates of sepsis or transmission of bacterial infections^{7,8}. One study considered the length of hospital stay between co-bedded and individually bedded twins and found that co-bedded twins had a lower average stay, though this was not statistically significant⁸.

Researchers also considered sleep quality and safety at home, or a simulated home environment in a laboratory. In the included studies, sleep-wake synchrony was improved in co-bedded twins, and one study found that co-bedded twins were more likely to remain asleep when the other cried^{7,13}. Studies which considered thermoregulation did not find any changes in core temperature between individually bedded and co-bedded infants^{8,13}. The review of evidence found no data to support a link between co-bedding and SIDS⁵, noting that in one study, an infant's arm had rested on their twin's face, but this did not result in changes to physical observations¹³.

References

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Frequently asked questions

What does the research show?

Twins and higher-order multiples, such as triplets, have an increased risk of SIDS, though this is probably because they are more likely to be born at low weight and/or premature, which are known risk factors for SIDS. When these factors are taken into account, twins appear to have a similar SIDS risk to singletons.

Can twins sleep in the same cot?

Yes, newborn twins can sleep in the same cot. Research suggests that putting twins in the same cot (co-bedding) can help them regulate their body temperatures and sleep cycles and soothe each other too. Many families choose to co-bed their twins because they have limited space and can only fit one cot in their bedroom but want to follow the safer sleep advice of sleeping in the same room as their babies for the first six months.

If you decide to co-bed your twins in the early weeks and months, there are a few key points to consider:

- Only place them side-by-side in a cot in the early weeks. Make sure they're not close enough to touch and potentially block each other's airway.
- Once any of your babies start to roll, move them to their own sleep space so they can't roll onto each other.
- If you have triplets or quads, they could share a cot in the early days if they sleep with their feet to the sides of the cot.
- Don't use rolled up towels, pillows or anything else between their heads as these could block their airway. We also don't recommend cot dividers.
- Don't place your babies in the same Moses basket. Moses baskets are too small to share and could lead to overheating.

Can I bed share/co-sleep with my twins?

Bedsharing, also known as co-sleeping, is where babies share a bed or other sleep space with an adult. This is different to "co-bedding" which is where your babies share a sleep space, but not with an adult. However, some families choose to bedshare and others sometimes fall asleep with their baby without meaning to, so it's always a good idea to think about how you can make your bed safer, just in case. If you bedshare with twins or multiples, we advise only bedsharing with one baby at a time to reduce the risk of accidents.

There are certain situations where you should avoid bedsharing completely as there is a higher risk of SIDS. In particular, if your baby was born prematurely or had a low birthweight, which is common in multiples.

Also avoid bedsharing if anyone in the bed smokes or the baby was exposed to smoking in pregnancy and if anyone in the bed has drunk any alcohol or taken drugs or medicines that make them sleepy.

My twins were slept close together on NICU, should I continue this at home?

Premature or low birth-weight twins and multiples are often slept close together on the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU). This is to mimic how they were in the womb (known as the intrauterine environment) and support the development of their vital functions such as their heart rate and breathing. Once your babies are discharged from hospital, they should be ready to sleep in line with the safer sleep advice for twins and multiples above, which is continued in further detail on our safer sleep pages.

My health visitor told me it's better for twins to sleep together in the cot, why is that?

Health professionals often promote co-bedding your twins or multiples so that you can share a room with them if you have limited space. Sharing a room with your babies is important for at least the first six months. This is because it lowers the risk of SIDS as it means you can keep an eye on them. There are other reasons you might want to co-bed your twins as well. Research suggests that putting twins in the same

cot can help them regulate their body temperatures and sleep cycles and can soothe each other too.

How long can my twins sleep in the same cot?

Babies will need separate sleep spaces once one of them begins to roll or move about the cot. This is because there is a risk they could roll onto each other which means they could accidentally block each other's airways (ability to breathe), or risk overheating, which increases the risk of SIDS.

What should I do if I don't have space for two cots in my room?

It can sometimes be tough to stick to all the safer sleep advice for practical reasons, especially if you're short on space. If you can't fit two cots in your bedroom, you could leave doors open between your room and theirs or perhaps take it in turns with a partner to sleep with the twins in a nursery room. You might even be able to borrow something smaller than a second cot, such as a crib, for a couple of months.

What is the key takeaway for families?

You can co-bed twins and multiples, following safer sleep guidelines. However, if your babies were born before 37 weeks or weighing less than 2.5kg, ensure each baby has their own separate sleep space.

