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## News

### Numbers small, but loss is huge: Focus is on education after SIDS deaths leap

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A dramatic increase in the number of unexplained deaths among Manchester and Vernon infants in recent years has local health organizations stepping up education efforts on the sleeping habits of babies.

According to local mortality figures, between March and December 2007 there were 11 fetal and newborn deaths in the two towns, four of which were attributed to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, or SIDS.

That's more SIDS deaths in a nine-month period than in the previous seven years combined, says Candy Parker, a local nurse and program coordinator for the "Back to Sleep" initiative, a state-funded program run by the Eastern Connecticut Health Network.

Even more disturbing is that three of the infants were found dead after sleeping in an adult bed, Parker adds.

"We were quite alarmed because the time before that we were finding one SIDS death every six months for the last year or two preceding that period," Parker says.

Also known as "crib death," SIDS is the leading cause of death in this country for babies under 1 year old. It's a broad label used for any unexplainable death of a seemingly healthy baby.

While causes are unknown, there are major risk factors: babies who suffer from brain abnormalities, genetic conditions, low birth weight, or exposure to smoking have health issues that can trigger the syndrome.

And unwise sleeping habits — such as sleeping in bed with an adult — heighten the risk.

Infants can easily get tangled and smothered in pillows and blankets, or even be crushed by a sleeping adult.

All babies should be put in bed in cribs on their backs rather than their stomachs or sides, which ensures the infants get enough oxygen, health officials say.

Manchester Health Director Maryann Cherniak Lexius said the local Fetal and Infant Mortality Review program is one of about 200 across the country, and five in the state, including New Britain, New Haven, Windham, and Hartford.



Candy Parker holds five day old Daltin Harrison, Monday, November 17, 2008, at the the Family Birthing Center at Manchester Memorial Hospital, the baby is wearing a sleep sackthat helps to prevent SIDS. (Jim Michaud/Journal Inquirer)

Funded through a Public Health Department grant, which totaled \$57,000 this year, the program has been run locally since 2001, branching out to other towns such as South Windsor, where a lecture is being held Wednesday.

Ginny Molleur, parent educator with the South Windsor Youth and Family Services Department, said Wednesday's "Back to Sleep" program is free and geared to parents, grandparents, babysitters, and day-care providers who want more information on safe sleeping for infants.

It's only one of many educational "Back to Sleep" programs hosted by Eastern Connecticut Health Network.

Health officials also are distributing materials to organizations dealing with families and children, such as libraries, police departments, and Birth-to-Three programs.

And each month Parker sifts through death certificates and medical records while also interviewing parents looking for a system change or gap in services.

Officials also are trying to identify the causes and pass that information on to area community action teams for intervention, Parker said.

"We're now focusing on an aspect of prematurity," she said, adding that parents who have lost infants also are given bereavement support.

Parker says she is not sure if the increase in deaths is due to a one-time statistical coincidence or a trend. Still, it's worthwhile educating the community about known risk factors and preventive measures, as the exact cause of SIDS remains unknown, she says.

Besides keeping infants out of adult beds, the American Academy of Pediatrics also suggests that babies sleep on a firm mattress with a tight fitted sheet and that soft objects, such as loose blankets or stuffed animals, be kept out of the area.

The academy also recommends parents practice supervised "tummy time" when the baby is awake to reduce the chance of flat spots developing on the infant's head.

Overheating is also a factor that could cause SIDS, so don't turn up the heat too much in babies' rooms or overdress them for sleep.

Parker suggests investing in sack-style blanket sleeper pajamas for infants to keep them warm.

Over 300 such "Halo" brand sacks were purchased for Manchester Memorial Hospital's neonatal intensive care unit and are available to parents through the hospital at a reduced rate, Parker said.

The campaign began 18 months ago, and there have been no SIDS deaths in Manchester or Vernon since December, Parker said.

"Whether that's due to the information or what, I don't know," she said, adding: "It is still important to prevent as many potential SIDS deaths as possible, no matter what the statistics will turn out to be."

For more information about the "Back to Sleep" program, contact ECHN at 646-1222, ext. 2431

To register for the Wednesday lecture in South Windsor, call 648-6361, ext. 314.

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