

Baby care - safety issues

Providing a safe environment is an important part of caring for your new baby. Babies need to be safe at home and when they're away from home with you. Some simple tips can help you to keep your baby safe and secure. Always consult your own health care professional if you have concerns about your baby.

Keep your baby safe

Make your baby's safety a priority. These are some of the main safety issues to keep in mind:

- Take your baby home from hospital safely in a capsule or other approved child restraint for newborns that faces the back of the car.
- Travel with your baby in a child restraint at all times.
- Provide a safe sleeping environment for your baby – this includes taking precautions for Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) prevention.
- Provide a safe environment at home.
- Check for a safe environment when you are away from home.

Car safety

Children copy what they see adults doing on the streets and in the car every day. Make sure you act safely and do the right thing when you are with young children. They learn most in their first years of life.

Children under one year of age must be restrained when being transported by car. The restraint must be:

- Approved by VicRoads (check that it carries an Australian Standards AS 1754 sticker).
- Suitable for the child's size and weight. Children need different restraints as their bodies grow. The restraint that you use must match the size and weight of your child's body.
- Adjusted to fit your child's body correctly.
- Properly fitted to the vehicle. Follow the manufacturer's instructions. Your local RACV/VicRoads Restraint Fitting Station can advise you on the correct fitting of the restraint.

Other safety issues to keep in mind include:

- Your baby should travel in the back seat of the car. By law the driver is responsible for ensuring that all passengers under the age of 16 are restrained correctly.
- Never leave your baby unattended in the car – not even for a short time. It is illegal to do so.
- The temperature in a car can reach dangerously high levels in a short period of time.
- Babies and children may overheat. Be particularly careful in warm weather. On a hot day, your baby may just need a light singlet or nightdress. Consider short car trips only in hot weather.
- Use the restraint for every journey, no matter how short. Most crashes occur close to home.
- Develop good car safety habits. Always put in and take out the baby on the kerb side – away from traffic.

Provide a safe environment at home

Newborn babies have very little protection against infection, so it is important that you provide a clean hygienic environment. One of the most important things you can do is to make sure that anyone who handles your baby, including you, has washed their hands before touching the baby.

People who have infections – for example colds, flu or ‘cold sores’ (herpes simplex) – should not come in contact with your baby. Cold sores can be particularly dangerous to a newborn baby. Vaccinations are available to protect your baby against some infectious diseases. Your Maternal and Child Health nurse will advise you.

General safety tips at home

Injuries often happen unexpectedly because adults are unaware of what babies can do and how quickly they develop new skills. Understanding a child’s development will assist in planning ahead for safety. Different risks emerge at each new stage of development and change takes place very rapidly in the pre-school years.

Make sure your baby is safe at all times. You should:

- Supervise young children whenever they are near the baby.
- Keep animals away from the baby. The change in composition of the household when there is a new baby may upset some pets, and babies can easily annoy a pet with their actions.
- Avoid hot drinks when nursing your baby.
- When you change your baby, make sure you put them down in a safe place; for example, use a change table with raised edges to prevent the baby rolling off. Never leave your baby alone on the change table.

Make bath time a safe time

When you give your baby (or child) a bath:

- Always supervise your child in the bath. The carer should always be within arm’s reach of the child.
- Do not use a baby support to prop up a baby in the bath.
- Never leave an older child to supervise a younger child in the bath.
- Take your child with you if your telephone or doorbell rings while you are supervising your child in the bath.
- Empty the bath immediately after use.
- Always keep the doors to the bathroom and laundry securely closed.

Provide a safe sleeping environment

Many parents worry about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Research has shown that there are some simple things you can do to reduce the risk of SIDS:

- Put the baby on their back when you put them to sleep.
- Don’t have fluffy toys, ‘bumpers’ or doona covers in the cot or bassinette – they can cause babies to overheat or suffocate.
- Make up the bottom of the cot with blankets and sheets, like you would a normal bed; place the baby with their feet at the bottom of the cot.
- Keep your baby’s head uncovered while they sleep.
- Don’t let anyone smoke in the house or around your baby.

Keep your baby safe when you’re out

Make sure you use a baby stroller or pram correctly. Don’t hang shopping bags from the handles as it could cause the stroller to tip over. Make sure you read the manufacturer’s instructions and use the safety features. Always put the harness on your baby, even for short trips, to avoid fall injuries.

Remember to protect your baby from the sun and wind. A simple cloth thrown over the stroller may be enough, but it needs to be very light to avoid trapping heat inside the stroller. Sunshades can be bought from baby supply stores.

Child-proofing your home

Accidents or injuries are the most common cause of death in childhood beyond the first year of life and are a major reason for children needing medical attention.

Most injuries in children do not occur by chance or by bad luck and are not an act of fate – the majority are predictable and largely preventable. The term ‘injury’ is now used rather than ‘accident’ (accident implies that the event could not have been prevented).

By their very nature children are active, curious and often excitable. These are all attributes that put them at risk of injury. As a parent or carer, you can do a lot to prevent injury to your child.

10 tips for home safety

- Prevent scalds in the bathroom. Reduce the temperature of the hot tap water at the basin, bath and shower to 50°C or fit a thermostatic mixing or tempering valve.
- Use door barriers across kitchen and bathroom doors.
- Store medicines and cleaning products in lockable cupboards.
- To prevent choking, choose age-appropriate toys with no small parts.
- Avoid feeding your baby raw pieces of carrot and raw apple. Serve carrots and apples by shredding, grating or steaming to reduce the risk of choking. Peanuts are not suitable for children under the age of five. Teach children to sit quietly while they are eating.
- Keep cups of hot tea and coffee out of reach of children.
- Stay with children at all times when they're in the bath.
- Keep nappy buckets off the floor and make sure they have a firm, well-fitting lid.
- Fit guards to heaters and open fires, install smoke detectors and practise your evacuation plan.
- Choose nursery furniture that meets Australian Standards.

Where to get help

- Maternal and Child Health nurse
- Your doctor
- National SIDS Council of Australia Tel. 1300 308 307 www.sidsandkids.org/
- The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- The Resource Centre for Child Health and Safety (CHAS) Tel. (03) 9345 6429
- VicRoads, Road Safety Telephone Information Service Tel. 1300 360 745
- RACV Tel. 137 228 – anywhere in Victoria
- Consumer Affairs Victoria Tel. 1300 55 81 81

Things to remember

- Always have your baby in an approved restraint when you travel by car.
- Always use the five-point safety harness in your high chair, stroller or pram. This harness goes over your baby's shoulders, round their waist and between their legs.
- Put your baby to sleep on their back and keep fluffy toys and doonas out of the cot.
- Don't let anyone smoke in the house or near your baby.

Want to know more?

Go to More information for support groups, related links and references.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Royal Childrens Hospital - Safety Centre

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