

Newborn Care: Safety Tips

As a new parent, it is your responsibility to keep your baby safe from harm. Begin by bringing your baby into a safe home. Accidents are the number one killer of infants, and most can be prevented. Take precautions to avoid accidents when bathing. Always check the temperature of the bath water on your wrist before putting your child in it. You can also lower the temperature on your water heater.

While bathing, keep one hand on your baby and wash with the other. And never leave your newborn alone in the tub, in the sink, or around water. Having a safe crib for your baby can also prevent accidents. The crib should have slats no more than two and three eighths inches apart. The corners should be rounded; and the crib should be free of posts, knobs, splinters, cracks, lead based paint, and be in overall good condition. If you are inheriting a crib, make sure that it complies with these safety requirements. Do not use a drop-side crib.

The crib's mattress should be firm and fit snugly to prevent gaps where legs and arms could get caught. The mattress should be lowered before the baby begins to sit up. There is no need to use bumper pads in your baby's crib. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics says it is safer not to use bumper pads. Pillows, heavy blankets, and toys should not be in the crib.

Research has shown that the safest position for healthy full-term infants to sleep is on their backs. Do not be tempted to buy a sleep positioner though. Most are unsafe and not needed. If your newborn has had problems with breathing, swallowing, or vomiting, check with your healthcare provider about the safest sleeping position.

Your child's toys should not have points or edges and should be free of small parts that could be pulled off and swallowed. All toys should be age appropriate so that your baby can safely enjoy them. To protect your newborn in a car, always use a car seat. You will need one when you leave the hospital. Car seats must be installed according to the manufacturer's directions. Be sure to read the instructions on your car seat and in your vehicle's owner's manual before installing it.

Car seats can be installed safely using either the seat belt or the latch system. All vehicles since 2002 are equipped with LATCH; Lower Anchors and Tethers for Children, to hold a safety seat without using a seat belt. When using a seat belt, make sure it stays tight around the car seat at all times. If the belt loosens or the seat moves more than 1 inch from side to side, be sure you have locked the seat belt.

Make sure to use a car seat that is the appropriate size for your child. Some infant seats will not work for newborns less than 5 pounds. You can use the attachable headrest to provide extra support for your infant's head but for safety, only use the headrest that comes with your baby's car seat.

The car seat's shoulder strap, in the rear facing position, must be threaded through the slot that is at or below the level of the child's shoulders. The straps must fit snugly. To keep your baby warm, harness your baby into the car seat first and then add a blanket. Adding bulky clothing or swaddling before strapping your baby in can reduce safety.

Your baby should remain in the back seat, in the rear facing position, until she is at least 2 years old. If you can, put the car seat in the middle of the backseat. It is the safest position in the car. Never put your infant or child in the front passenger seat because an air bag that opens could seriously injure or kill a baby or child. And under no circumstances should you ever leave your baby alone in a car.

If you have any questions about the safety of your car seat, contact a certified car seat safety technician. To find one in your area, contact The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration at www.safercar.gov.