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WAKING UP TO PRETERM RISKS

Spotlight on sleep positions

BRIGID O'CONNELL

EXTREMELY preterm babies could have a better chance of avoiding life-threatening brain injuries in the first week of life by changing their sleeping position.

Researchers from the Hudson Institute of Medical Research have found that infants who sleep on their backs in the week after birth get increased oxygen to the brain, compared to preterm babies who snooze on their stomach.

Associate Professor Flora Wong, also from Monash University and a neonatologist at Monash Health, said premature babies in intensive care units were rotated between sleeping on their backs and stomach, with a preference for sleeping chest down to improve their breathing.

But this is the opposite advice parents are given about preventing Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. The 30-year-old international guidelines promoting back-to-sleep have dramatically reduced the incidence of SIDS, including in preterm babies who are at highest risk.

"Breathing problems for premature babies are a matter

of life and death in the first few weeks of life. That's why they're put in the prone position," Prof Wong said.

"We know babies can expand their lungs better with their front chest wall stabilised on the bed. "Their oxygen requirement goes down and they're less likely to need high levels of ventilation.

"But we often face controversy in educating parents because they see nurses do the opposite to SIDS guidelines."

Prof Wong said while it was established that stomach-down sleeping was best for premature infant respiration, they now wanted to measure its impact on the developing brain.

Preterm babies are at high risk of brain bleeds because of their immature blood vessels, making it vital for them to get enough oxygen to the brains. The highest risk is in the first week after birth.

Hudson PhD student Kelsey Shepherd said they measured the brain oxygen levels and breathing effort during

both prone and supine sleeping in 56 babies born between 24 and 29 weeks. Tests started in the first week of life, and were repeated each week until the infant was discharged from the intensive care unit.

They found babies had lower levels of brain oxygen when sleeping on their stomach, suggesting reduced blood flow to the brain. The

findings were published in the *Journal of Pediatrics*.

The researchers are now seeking funding for a clinical trial in unstable preterm babies to see if changing sleeping positions can reduce brain

injury risk and improve neurodevelopment.

"The downside is that some babies might need more oxygen support for their breathing," Prof Wong said. "That is something we need to trial to assess the pros and cons of babies on their backs."

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Ivy, who was born 28 weeks premature, with mum Courtney Andrews by her side. Picture: ALEX COPPEL