

PRESS RELEASE

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New research confirms that the risk of stillbirth is doubled if women go to sleep on their backs in the third trimester

- The Midlands and North of England Stillbirth Study (MiNESS), published today in *BJOG: An International Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, is the largest study of maternal sleep position and risk of stillbirth.
- The study was funded by Action Medical Research, Cure Kids, Sands and Tommy's
- The increased risk associated with women going to sleep on their back has now been demonstrated consistently by four studies in women of different ethnicities and in different countries.
- If all pregnant women in the UK went to sleep on their side in the third trimester, MiNESS estimates a 3.7% decrease in stillbirth, saving around 130 babies' lives a year.
- Internationally, this advice has the potential to save up to 100,000 babies a year.
- A public health campaign, the Sleep On Side campaign, led by the charity Tommy's to educate women about the risk of going to sleep on their back in late pregnancy, also launches today.
- Around 1 in 225 pregnancies in the UK end in stillbirth.

The Midlands and North of England Stillbirth Study (MiNESS) found that women who go to sleep in the supine (lying on the back) position have a 2.3-fold increased risk of late stillbirth (after 28 weeks' gestation) compared with women who go to sleep on their side.

Led by Professor Alexander Heazell, Clinical Director at the Tommy's Stillbirth Research Centre at St Mary's Hospital, Manchester, MiNESS is the largest study to examine maternal sleep and late stillbirth. It looked into 291 pregnancies that ended in stillbirth and 735 women who had a live birth. It confirms findings from earlier studies in New Zealand and Australia that, in the third trimester (after 28 weeks of pregnancy), pregnant women who go to sleep on their back are more likely to have a stillbirth.

Although researchers cannot say for certain why the risk is increased, there are several theories. In the third trimester, when the woman is lying on her back, the combined weight of baby and uterus (womb) puts pressure on the main blood vessels that supply the uterus, and this can restrict blood flow/oxygen to the baby. Other possible explanations include disturbed breathing during sleep, which is worse when a woman sleeps on her back and in overweight or obese women, who also have an increased risk of stillbirth.

The advice to pregnant women is to go to sleep on their side for any episode of sleep in the third trimester, including:

- going to sleep at night
- returning to sleep after any night awakenings
- day time naps

As the going-to-sleep position is the one held longest during the night, women should not to be concerned if they wake up on their back, but should simply roll back onto their side.

The MiNESS study did not find a difference in risk between sleeping on the right or left side. One of the previous studies did show that sleeping on the right increased the risk, but as this was not found in the other three studies, the Tommy's Sleep On Side campaign recommends that women can go to sleep on either side.

Professor Heazell says:

"Around 11 babies are stillborn every day in the UK. Stillbirth is devastating, with long-lasting effects on bereaved parents. Parents want to know why their baby has died, whether it might happen again if they try for another baby and what they can do to avoid further stillbirth."

At the Tommy's Stillbirth Research Centre we work to identify what we call 'modifiable risk factors' for stillbirth. These risk factors are things in day-to-day life that increase expectant mothers' chances of having a stillborn baby that, importantly, the women have the power to alter, either alone or with medical help."

We believe that identifying, and avoiding, risk factors that are strongly associated with stillbirth will reduce the number of babies who are stillborn. The MiNESS results have implications as they indicate that if women go to sleep on their side while pregnant rather than on their back there could be 3.7% reduction in stillbirth."

The four charities who funded the research have put out a joint statement:

"This research and campaign was only made possible with funding from our four charities, which are supported by parents who have experienced stillbirth. We hope that this information will help parents and reduce the number of babies who are stillborn each day" Action Medical Research, Curekids, Sands and Tommy's.

Mr Edward Morris, vice president for clinical quality at the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, said:

"This is an important study which adds to the growing body of evidence that sleep position in late pregnancy is a modifiable risk factor for stillbirth. This new research is extremely welcome as a significant number of stillbirths remain unexplained, particularly those in late pregnancy. The impact of stillbirth on parents and professionals is devastating and the RCOG is committed to working collaboratively on research, audit and training for healthcare professionals in order to achieve a substantial reduction in the UK stillbirth rate."

Louise Silverton, Director for Midwifery at the Royal College of Midwives, said:

"Stillbirth is a terrible tragedy for mothers and their families and we must do all we can to bring stillbirth rates down.

"This addition to current knowledge is very welcome. The Tommy's campaign and the research findings are a great example of how through making small changes we can begin to bring down stillbirth rates. It is a simple change that can make a difference and it will be important to ensure that this is communicated effectively to women."

Tips for going to sleep on your side in the last three months of pregnancy

- Put a pillow or pillows behind your back to encourage side-sleeping.
- If you wake during the night, check your position and go back to sleep on your side.
- Pay the same attention to sleep position during the day as you would during the night.
- If you wake on your back during the night, don't worry, just roll onto your side.

-ends-

NOTES TO EDITORS:

- Participants were recruited between April 2014 and March 2016.
- Eligible women were given a description of the study by their obstetrician or midwife. The participant information sheet stated that the goal of the study was to "look at medical factors associated with stillbirth but also environmental and lifestyle factors that can affect pregnancy and the wellbeing of the baby." Sleep position was not specifically mentioned in any of the patient-facing literature.
- The Sleep On Side campaign (#SleepOnSide | www.tommys.org/sleeponside) is led by Tommy's and endorsed by NHS England, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives and the Royal College of GPs.

The Sleep On Side campaign animation can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TxwBvq7K3Jg&feature=youtu.be> and it can be downloaded here:
<http://bit.ly/2hvDiCy>

For more information and to request an interview with Professor Alex Heazell, please contact Hannah Blake, Press Manager at Tommy's on E: hannahblake@gmail.com or T: 07730 039361

ABOUT THE FUNDERS:

Action Medical Research is the leading UK-wide charity saving and changing children's lives through medical research. For 65 years we've helped pioneer ways to prevent disease and develop treatments benefiting millions of people. Our research has helped to beat polio in the UK, develop ultrasound in pregnancy, fight meningitis and prevent stillbirths. But we urgently need to develop more new treatments and cures for sick babies and children and we can't do it without you. www.action.org.uk

Charity reg. nos 208701 and SC039284.

Cure Kids

Cure Kids is New Zealand's leading child health research charity. We have been in existence for over 45 years, and, in this time, invested close to \$40m into child health research. We have been active across a number of conditions and diseases, making lasting impacts, including our work in the early 90s with regards to sleep position of infants, which has gone on to save the lives of thousands of babies both in New Zealand and around the world. Research which helped to diagnose cystic fibrosis quickly and accurately was also funded by Cure Kids, and this has made a demonstrable impact on the life expectancy of those living with cystic fibrosis. Cure Kids also happen to be at the coalface of ever-emerging issues such as the epidemic proportions of childhood obesity, as well as the ever-increasing rates of mental health issues in our children and young people. Our vision is that all children ought to enjoy a healthy childhood, and we're determined to make this vision a reality.

Sands is the leading stillbirth and neonatal death charity in the UK, working nationally to reduce baby deaths by promoting better maternity care and supporting research, and bringing the voice of bereaved parents to the fore. Our pregnancy website www.saferpregnancy.org.uk delivers easy-to-read messages about reducing risk during pregnancy. And our comprehensive programme of training and resources supports professionals to improve the bereavement care they provide for parents. We also provide a bereavement support service nationally through our helpline services and locally through around 100 regional support groups across the UK. Further information can be found at www.sands.org.uk

Charity reg. nos 299679 and SC042789

Tommy's is the largest pregnancy and baby charity in the UK. We fund research into pregnancy problems and provide pregnancy health information to parents-to-be. We believe it is unacceptable that one in four women lose a baby during pregnancy and birth. With five research centres across the UK investigating the causes of miscarriage, stillbirth and premature birth, we lead the way in maternal and fetal research in the UK.

Our pregnancy health information is provided through the midwife-led Tommy's Pregnancy Health Service, which includes our [comprehensive pregnancy information website](#), our [Tommy's Midwives facebook page](#) and our free Midwives helpline, the PregnancyLine. We believe every pregnancy should have a happy ending and that every baby should have the best chance of being born healthy. www.tommys.org

Charity reg. nos 1060508 and SC039280

ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER:

The University of Manchester, a member of the prestigious Russell Group, is the UK's largest single-site university with 38,600 students and is consistently ranked among the world's elite for graduate employability.

The University is also one of the country's major research institutions, rated fifth in the UK in terms of 'research power' (REF 2014). World class research is carried out across a diverse range of fields including cancer, advanced materials, addressing global inequalities, energy and industrial biotechnology. No fewer than 25 Nobel laureates have either worked or studied here. It is the only UK university to have social responsibility among its core strategic objectives, with staff and students alike dedicated to making a positive difference in communities around the world. Manchester is ranked 35th in the world in the Academic Ranking of World Universities 2016 and 5th in the UK. The University had an annual income of almost £1 billion in 2015/16.

Visit www.manchester.ac.uk for further information. Facts and figures:
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Case studies available on request

Marina Fogle

Marina Fogle, 39, is the founder of The Bump Class and the chart topping podcast, The Parent Hood. She spends her working days collaborating with experts to give curious and often bewildered parents answers to important questions.

Marina lives in London with her husband Ben Fogle and two children, Ludo (7) and Iona (6). After their son Willem was stillborn in 2014, Marina has been searingly honest about the trauma of losing a child, the stigma of stillbirth and a committed supporter of Tommy's.

Marina says: "I am delighted to support Tommy's #SleepOnSide campaign, and ensure as many pregnant women as possible know the simple but lifesaving advice that it's safest to sleep on your side during the third trimester. Having experienced the stillbirth of my son, Willem, this is a cause that is particularly close to my heart. Being introduced to the work that Tommy's does, to the dedication and single-mindedness of their researchers, who simply won't take "we don't know" for an answer, has been hugely inspiring. Tommy's believe the answers exist. I visited Tommy's Manchester research centre last year and heard about the breakthroughs they are making. This centre is the only stillbirth centre in the UK and it is here that Professor Alex Heazell and his team have reduced the stillbirth rate in Greater Manchester by 34% over the last six years. It is very important to me to be part of the work Tommy's is doing to reach all pregnant women with life-saving pregnancy information."

Michelle Cottle

Michelle Cottle, 36, lives in London and has two children; Orla, who was stillborn in 2016 and Esme who was born a year later. She was Tommy's Mum's Voice award winner in 2017 and as well as blogging, works as a Clinical Psychologist, so she has a special interest in the mental health and wellbeing of those who have suffered baby loss.

"I feel very proud to support Tommy's #SleepOnSide campaign. As a healthcare professional, I am excited to see how academic research can actually be used in a campaign such as this, to help educate and empower families to have safer pregnancies. Of course, as someone who has experienced stillbirth, new evidence will always bring about painful thoughts and feelings, because I will always wonder if this could have helped to save Orla. However, I am committed to supporting Tommy's to help ensure that fewer families have to suffer the heartache that we have. Their research really can help save babies lives - and that is a truly amazing thing."

References

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