

October is SIDS Awareness Month

By James Lee, MD

October is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) awareness month, and I wanted to take the opportunity to share my story of how this came to be such a personal matter for me.

Aeron was my second child. He was all-smiles since his earliest days. Almost every picture or memory I had of him was of his big chubby cheeks with a silly-looking grin. He completed our family of four. We had just come back from my birthday brunch celebration with friends and family. We were all tired. My wife had nursed Aeron and put him down for a nap in his crib in our bedroom before leaving for work at the hospital. I fell asleep on the couch in the living room with the Super Bowl on in the background. Aeron was never the best napper, and I remember waking up from my own nap in a bit of a panic since I had not heard him cry for a while. Out of instinctual fear, I ran into the bedroom and found him entangled in a blanket that was accidentally left in that crib. Thinking back now, I already knew at that moment what had happened, and I started to scream as I unwrapped him from the blanket. He was already stiff, and he was not breathing. He was 10 months old when he died from sudden unexpected infant death (SUID).

Despite 10 months of following recommendations to keep my children safe, one moment of complacency led to the worst day of my family's life. At that time, Aeron didn't seem like an infant anymore — he had been rolling around for months, he was almost walking, and he was so strong and healthy. My family learned the hard way that there was no justification for taking any risk. Unfortunately, that is all it takes.

One moment.

That *one moment* is something that we would never wish upon any loving family. For me, nothing can compare to losing your child. This is coming from someone who has suffered from abuse, poverty, homelessness, and the unexpected loss of my beloved mother. The pain was excruciating. While it was tempting to try to erase all reminders of him and bury our feelings of grief and sadness, we needed to face this loss head-on.

We created Aeron's Foundation at first to be able to do something that devoted time to thinking about Aeron and doing something for him while still making him an integral and active part of our lives. Though it was painful work, it was necessary for us to start some type of healing process. Aeron's Foundation exists not only to promote awareness of safe sleeping habits for infants and families but also to support families who have suffered from a SIDS/SUID loss.

As a pediatrician, I “take” Aeron with me to work daily. I talk to my patients about him all the time. If he can’t physically be with me and my family, I want him to be with me and to play a role in the care that I provide for my families and for the community. I want Aeron’s story to have an impact on parents so that they will ensure their children sleep safely and live a fulfilling life.

While we are a small “mom and pop” organization, the support from friends and family has been overwhelming and gives us the energy to keep going. We have been working with the Los Angeles Department of Public Health to provide opportunities for financial assistance for families who have recently suffered a loss due to SIDS/SUID. We have partnered with local children’s hospitals to start providing sleeping sacks because we know loose bedding and blankets pose a barrier to safe sleep for infants. Using a sleeping sack allows for babies to keep snug while avoiding the potential for clothes, bedding, swaddles, or blankets to get entangled around the mouth or face and hinder their breathing. I talk about the importance of room sharing and not co-bedding. I reflect on that day when Aeron passed and how I wished I had just been in the room with him.

So please, while October may be SIDS awareness month, this critical education needs to be yearlong. Safe sleep recommendations are not being followed as pediatricians would advise. This is among families from ALL demographics. Please promote a safe sleeping environment.

An infant should be **A**lone, on their **B**ack, in their **C**rib to start **D**ecreasing the risk for SIDS/SUID. **E**xclusive breastfeeding and **F**ollowing the CDC immunization schedule to protect your child is also critical. **G**et healthy by avoiding smoking, alcohol, and drug use. Avoid over-**H**eating your infant. **I**ntroduce a pacifier after the first month to also reduce your SIDS/SUID risk. For healthcare professionals who see infants/parents, **J**ust remember to endorse the AAP’s safe sleep recommendations from birth and **K**eep checking in with the families about safe sleep throughout the first year. **L**astly, for expectant **M**others, please get regular prenatal care.



James H Lee, MD is an academic general pediatrician at UCLA. He is passionate about medical education, mentorship, and safe sleep of course! He devotes the rest of his spare time to his family, Aeron’s Foundation, and eating good food. Follow him on Instagram @aeronsfoundation and Twitter @jlee9531.