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News that matters

E. Coli, Staph Infections Possible Culprits in SIDS

Date Published: Tuesday, June 3rd, 2008

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome—SIDS—has long baffled the medical community and is one of the leading causes of death in children under the age of one. Now, British researchers say they may have found that bacteria is a contributing factor in SIDS and say that potentially dangerous bacteria such as *Staphylococcus aureus* and *E. coli* was found in nearly half of all babies who died suddenly and without explanation over a decade at a London hospital.

Findings were published in Friday's *Lancet* medical journal. "This may be another piece to the puzzle," said Marian Willinger, a SIDS expert at the U.S. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. Willinger was not connected to the British study. A SIDS diagnosis means that no other cause of death can be found in an otherwise healthy infant who dies suddenly, usually in their sleep. In the United States, SIDS kills over 2,000 infants annually.

The researchers cautioned that while the bacteria were found in the SIDS babies and bacterial infections have long been suspected by some doctors to play a role in SIDS, these results do not necessarily mean the infections were responsible for the deaths. "We don't know whether it's a cause or if it's identifying another potential risk factor," said Dr. Nigel Klein, a professor at the Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, where the study was conducted and one of the authors. Klein said the higher level of bacteria might be evidence of another condition that killed the baby, such as a room that was too hot or had poor ventilation.

Researchers used autopsy samples from 470 infants who died suddenly and unexpectedly between 1996 and 2005 and found dangerous bacteria in 181 babies, or nearly half of the 365 whose deaths were unexplained. Similar bacteria were found in about a quarter—14 out of 53—of the babies who died of known causes, excluding those who died of bacterial infections. Generally, the bacteria were detected in the babies' lungs and spleens.

At birth, mothers transfer some of their antibodies to their babies. When babies reach eight to 10 weeks of age—the age at which SIDS typically strikes—the mother's antibodies have nearly depleted and the babies usually have not begun producing enough, making them particularly vulnerable to infections, said James Morris, a pathologist at the Royal Infirmary in Lancaster, who co-authored an accompanying commentary in the journal. "The study is a good indicator that certain bacteria might be involved in causing sudden infant deaths," he said.

Willinger suggested that such bacterial infections might simply aggravate other risk factors for SIDS. "The bacteria in combination with other co-factors might push these babies over the edge," she said. Recommendations for preventing SIDS include putting babies to sleep on their backs and avoiding putting too many blankets on them.

Meanwhile, a nonpartisan congressional report released in April stated that the U.S. government could do more to force hospitals to prevent infections that are killing up to 99,000 people annually. Last year alone, 94,000 Americans developed MRSA—methicillin-resistant *S. aureus*; most were infected in healthcare facilities and 19,000 died.

NewsInferno.com disclaimer: This article: E. Coli, Staph Infections Possible Culprits in SIDS was posted on Tuesday, June 3rd, 2008 at 5:53 am at NewsInferno.com and is filed under E. Coli, Food Poisoning, Health Concerns, Legal News.!