

This is a letter from White Lotus Home to [Mothering Magazine](#).

Thank you and thanks James McKenna for the informative article in the recent issue of Mothering (No. 81 Winter 1996.) I am certain that all of his research on co-sleeping will be of great value to parents everywhere. I find it unfortunate that he, like all United States SIDS researchers, does not report on the conclusive evidence of the link between SIDS and off-gassing of mattresses. Clearly, there may be other factors contributing to SIDS, all of which need to be explored. And clearly, some of the suggestions proposed to address these possible factors have had some positive effect in reducing SIDS-related deaths. But any good researcher also knows that correlation is not causation.

Everything from infant mortality research in Great Britain to adult health research in the US has shown that when the chemicals found in traditional mattresses are inhaled, health problems follow. Indeed, two television stations (in New York and Philadelphia, both ABC affiliates) have broadcast some of the results (laboratory rats subjected to mattress fumes have responses ranging from paralysis to death), but still, no one in this country will make the connection to SIDS. The British study in 1991 (biochemist and physiologist Barry Richardson, funded by TOMY, a toy company) showed the connection and shortly thereafter all mattresses were pulled off the shelves throughout Great Britain and the contents of traditional mattresses there (arsenic, phosphorus, antimony, etc.) have been more thoroughly scrutinized. Unfortunately, unlike the mad cow disease response, news of these events were squelched in the US. SIDS deaths in countries that import their mattresses from the UK have dropped since then and other manufacturers outside the US may have also gotten the hint, increasing the positive effect of this research, though McKenna and others may attribute these results to other research.

Domestically, many people have applauded the results of suggesting that babies sleep on their sides in a room that is not too warm, without many blankets or swaddling. (Babies tend to aspirate [inhale their own vomit] and choke when put on their backs, so the choice has been side or stomach for quite a while.) The fact is, the warmer the room (or the body lying on the mattress) the more likely the

increased amount of gas will be released from the mattress filling. And if you turn the baby's face away from the source, she is more likely to breathe fresh air and oxygen, not the off-gassing from the mattress. While the researchers who suggested cooler, side sleeping had their own, different, reasons for believing it would help, the result has been the same - reduced infant mortality.

One fact that James McKenna did touch upon, was that SIDS is almost unheard of in Asian countries and the incidence of SIDS increases when Asian migrate to Western locales (particularly the longer they have lived here.) In most of Asia, mattresses have not changed for thousands of years. The "futon" or "shikibuton" as they know it (loosely meaning "bed" in Japanese) is a thin layer of cotton encased in a cotton shell. It is quite firm and contains none of the chemicals that we take for granted as "necessary" in this country and other Western nations. (It should be noted that when mattress executives were interviewed for the ABC-TV investigations, they said they had "no idea" what chemicals were put into their mattresses and written requests have yielded a "those are proprietary trade secrets" response.) Barry Richardson's additional research in Japan found that SIDS is "no problem" in Japan. **Babies who sleep on futons don't die of SIDS.** And when their parents move to the West and eventually buy Western mattresses (or Westernize in their country, because emulation is quite the rage) it seems the Asian babies die. (Here, I am reading between the lines of McKenna's report.)

I am not a researcher, but a parent who has voraciously consumed the little information that has filtered into this country. My guess is, you would find that anywhere the mattresses are not made of springs and chemicals, SIDS has a lower incidence. Horsehair, straw, wool and other materials were used in this country for centuries and SIDS was never an issue. SIDS is a relatively new phenomenon, coinciding with all of the rest of chemical-, radiation- and pesticide-based "improvements" we have been the guinea pigs for in this modern society. I think you will find that wherever mattresses are simpler and more natural, SIDS is less prevalent.

It is important to note the genuine difference between a Japanese futon and the American version. Today, the converting couch market demands a very plush bouncy cushion, so the "futon" your local strip

mall or furniture discounter is offering is not what is appropriate for babies. (In fact, these may be so soft, they will allow a side-sleeping baby's vomit to pool, leading to aspiration-death.) As well, since the popularity of the futon couch has exploded, traditional mattress manufacturers have tried to dominate futon offerings nationwide and in an effort to give the American people what they think they want, some of these "futons" may contain some of the same chemicals a true futon is supposed to avoid. Indeed, a futon properly designed for the crib is very, very different from a smaller version of an adult futon. Look for a company that makes futons by hand (they will be better made and the seller has a far better idea of what she is actually selling) and ask what they know about crib futons, rather than 'do you carry futons in crib size?'

Organic cotton is great stuff, but the price is still quite high, especially on the East Coast (organic cotton is still not grown east of Texas.) A good futon shop will use Green Cotton, which simply means traditionally grown, but no further processing (dioxin-laden bleaches, heavy metal dyes, etc.) has occurred. White Lotus Home designed our crib futon after many, many prototypes and we sell them nationally. We are listed in the [Coop America Green Pages](#) and are more than happy to UPS a crib futon (or any size, of course) anywhere, but as of right now, our futons are only available through us.

It has been a personal crusade of mine to make a change in the crib mattress world for children and their parents in the same way that Earth's Best exposed the baby food industry. (It is unfortunate that they lost control of their company and now Gerber owns it!) If you discover any more research on the link between SIDS and mattresses, particularly domestic, please give it to your pediatrician and forward a copy to us.