

MEDIA RELEASE

National stillbirth prevention campaign launches to advise pregnant women to sleep safely during their last trimester

From today, pregnant women in New Zealand will benefit from a public health campaign providing vital information that could reduce the number of stillborn babies during late stages of pregnancy.

'Sleep on Side; Stillbirth Prevention Campaign' #sleeponside is rolling out nationwide and advises expectant mums to sleep on their side from 28 weeks of pregnancy.

The campaign has been developed by the University of Auckland and Ministry of Health, in partnership with child health research charity Cure Kids, following new evidence that has the potential to save lives of approximately 16 unborn babies a year in New Zealand.

Professor Lesley McCowan, Head of the University of Auckland's Obstetrics and Gynaecology Department, who leads the initiative says; "While it's been common for women to be advised to sleep on their side when pregnant, a decade of research carried out in four countries across different ethnicities, has now confirmed, the very consistent association between going-to-sleep position and stillbirth".

Lying on your back from 28 weeks presses on major blood vessels which can reduce blood flow to the womb and oxygen supply to the baby.

Approximately 1 in 20 women in New Zealand go to sleep on their back in the late stages of pregnancy. The Sleep on Side campaign raises awareness of the increased risk of stillbirth for such women and encourages a change in the sleeping position from 28 weeks of pregnancy.

Each year, in New Zealand, approximately 160 babies are stillborn in the last three months of pregnancy. It's estimated that if all pregnant women go to sleep on their side from 28 weeks of pregnancy, there would be a 10 percent decrease in late stillbirths nationally. Internationally, this change in sleeping position has the potential to save up to 100,000 babies a year.

Professor McCowan, and her team of New Zealand researchers, have been at the forefront of international research looking at risk factors for stillbirth for nearly 10 years. The conclusion from four studies – two by Professor McCowan in New Zealand, one in Australia and one from the UK – which analysed more than 800 late pregnancy stillbirth cases, reveals a 2.5 to 6-fold increase in the risk of late stillbirth if women go to sleep lying on their back.

"We can now confirm that going to sleep on either your left or right side halves the risk of stillbirth compared with going to sleep on your back. We're hoping this new information will have significant impact in changing habits," says Professor McCowan.

"The good news is that the going-to-sleep position has changed in recent years, with more New Zealand mums already taking heed of advice to sleep on their side during pregnancy. We anticipate a further increase in expectant mothers changing their sleep behaviour thanks to this campaign," adds Professor McCowan.

The campaign resources – brochures for pregnant women and health professionals and a social media video, featuring a voiceover by broadcaster Miriama Kamo and music by award-winning musician Claudia Gunn – are simple in their messaging, yet could make a huge difference for Kiwi families.

Vicki Culling PhD, a bereaved parent, whose first daughter was stillborn at 10 days overdue in 1998, has since been supporting bereaved parents and families and educating health professionals on pregnancy, baby and infant loss. Culling has worked alongside Professor McCowan and Cure Kids as the Project Coordinator on the 'Sleep on Side; Stillbirth Prevention Campaign'.

"It's so heartening to have researchers and health professionals working to reduce our stillbirth rates.," says Culling. "It's also hard for those mothers who did sleep on their backs in the past and whose babies died. We remind them that the research was not available for them, so they did not know this information."

The advice to pregnant women during the third trimester is *to go to sleep on their side for every sleep*, including; going to sleep at night, returning to sleep after any night-time awakenings and day-time naps.

Cure Kids has supported the programme of research that has provided the evidence for the 'Sleep on Side; Stillbirth Prevention Campaign' since 2007, enabling New Zealand researchers to lead the way with these internationally significant findings.

"We're delighted to see all this research result in tangible evidence which will provide future parents in New Zealand with important information for improved sleep practises during pregnancy, in order to change the stillbirth statistics," says Cure Kids CEO Frances Benge.

"The loss of an unborn child is a tragedy with long-term impact and consequences for families, which is why we've been backing this research. Now we're able to share the findings publicly through this education campaign to help make a difference here in New Zealand and around the world."

For more information about Sleep on Side; Stillbirth Prevention Campaign visit sleeponside.org.nz or speak to your doctor, midwife or obstetrician. On social media: #sleeponside @curekidsnz

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Photo caption: Professor Lesley McCowan and Cure Kids CEO Frances Benge launch the 'Sleep on Side; Stillbirth Prevention Campaign', developed by the University of Auckland and Ministry of Health, in partnership with Cure Kids.

For more information, case studies, images or to arrange an interview please contact:

Linda Shackelford, Expand PR, 027 886 1760, linda@expandpr.co.nz

Nicola Brebner, Expand PR, 021 204 3060, nicola@expandpr.co.nz

ABOUT CURE KIDS

Cure Kids is New Zealand's largest charitable funder of child health research. Cure Kids is committed to finding cures and better treatments for a wide range of serious child health conditions including, child cancer, obesity, autism spectrum disorders, asthma, inherited heart conditions, mental health, infectious diseases, epilepsy, and type 1 diabetes, among many others. Cure Kids is also committed to reducing the tragic and preventable deaths as a result of sudden infant death syndrome (SUDI) and stillbirth. Since forming more than 45 years ago, Cure Kids New Zealand has invested over NZ \$40 million in vital medical research which has saved, extended and improved the lives of thousands of children in New Zealand and around the world. Cure Kids is currently funding over \$10 million in child health research across 60 projects. For more information visit www.curekids.org.nz

About stillbirth and its impact on families:

- Losing an unborn baby after the first 20 weeks of pregnancy is classified as a stillbirth.
- Losing an unborn baby at or after 28 weeks of pregnancy is classified as a late stillbirth.
- Currently, in New Zealand, about 1 in every 200 women will have a stillbirth after 20 weeks and one in 500 women will have a stillbirth at or after 28 weeks (there's been a decline in stillbirth after 28 weeks' in recent years).
- It's estimated 2.64 million babies die before birth globally each year.
- Death of an unborn baby is a major public health problem with long-term consequences for families and is one of the most common causes of death in children.
- Stillbirth is one of the few remaining avoidable maternal and child health problems and is now approximately twice as common as neonatal death in the first month after birth.
- Prevention of stillbirth is a challenge in modern obstetric practice, despite great advances in the care of women and their babies in the past century.
- The psychosocial impacts on women, families, caregivers and communities, and wide-ranging economic impact on health systems and society, are far reaching.
- Other factors that help contribute to a healthy pregnancy include (source: Ministry of Health):
 - avoiding alcohol, smoking tobacco and cannabis, and taking drugs for anything other than health reasons (and be sure that any medicine you take for your health is safe in pregnancy)
 - being active and eating a healthy diet
 - maintaining a healthy weight
 - reducing stress and getting enough sleep.