Protecting our children from unintentional injury is a never-ending challenge for parents. As our infants and children go through a series of developmental stages, the challenges change for each stage. In this article, we will focus on infancy, the earliest stage from birth to 12 months. And we will consider four types of injuries: falls, motor vehicle injuries, fire and burn injuries, and poisonings.

Infants are vulnerable to falls simply because they are totally dependent on adults for their care and safety. And toward the end of the first year of life, as curious infants learn to crawl and walk, they are more likely to fall and suffer serious injury.

In a study of 990 infant injuries seen at an emergency department, falls accounted for 61 percent of infant injuries. Those infants fell from change tables, beds and living room furniture. They also fell down stairs, fell while using infant walkers, and fell from their parents’ arms.

What’s a parent to do? Before infants begin to crawl, install stair gates to prevent them from falling down stairs and to prevent them from wandering into areas of the home that are not child-safe. Do not leave a baby unattended on the changing table, the bed, or on couches or easy chairs.
When it comes to vehicle accidents, infants are physically vulnerable and at greater risk for injury than older children who are more developed. Securing an infant in a rear-facing seat is the safest option to support their head, neck, and back and prevent spinal cord injuries.

As passengers, it’s important that infants are positioned properly within the child restraint. Infants do not have adequate muscle control of their necks and relatively heavy heads to prevent their heads from falling forward or slouching when seated in an upright position. This can lead to a blocked airway and prevent the child from breathing properly. This is particularly dangerous for premature infants.

What’s a parent to do? Use a rear-facing, semi-reclined car seat until at least one year of age and 20 pounds. This is the safest option to support an infant’s weak neck muscles and his head and back.

Never leave a child alone in a car! When left in a vehicle, even on a cool but sunny day, an infant’s core body temperature may increase three to five times faster than an adult’s. This can lead to heat stroke, permanent injury, and even death.

Infancy and non-fire burns. The normal sequence of learning motor skills begins around six months of age and progresses from reaching for objects to crawling, walking and climbing. Meanwhile, infant cognitive skills are not advanced enough to recognize the risks from hot items that can burn them. Such items include hot liquids, hot pans, space heaters or curling irons. Infants also do
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not have the ability to control their impulses or understand the consequences of their actions.

Infants are also at greater risk of burn injuries because their skin is thinner than that of adults. As a result, an infant’s skin can burn in approximately one quarter the time it takes to burn an adult’s skin. Therefore, infants are more likely to be burned by hot bath water or a spilled hot beverage than an adult.

Along with being at greater risk for non-fire-related burns, infants are at a greater disadvantage in a fire. Because most infants cannot walk and many sleep in enclosed cribs, they cannot escape without an older person’s help if a fire occurs. And since studies show that only 23 percent of American households have practiced a fire escape plan in their home, this increases the risk of injury or death from a home fire.

Smoke inhalation is another significant risk for infants because of their smaller airways and higher respiratory rates. And since infants normally breathe much faster than older children and adults, they will breathe in more harmful gasses, such as carbon monoxide, and are more likely to suffer smoke inhalation injury.

In response to concerns about fire safety, families can do the following: install fire alarms throughout the home and practice an escape plan.

Regarding burn safety, set your water heater to 120 degrees or lower. Always test the bathwater with your wrist or elbow before placing your baby in it. Do not
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Hold a baby while cooking or carrying hot foods and liquids. And never microwave a baby’s bottle. Instead, heat bottles with warm water and test them before feeding a young infant.

Infancy and poisoning. Infants learn about the world using their senses. At four months of age, they begin exploring with their mouths. By the sixth month, infants are able to hold on to toys without dropping them and they are capable of completing hand-to-mouth movements. An infant’s desire to put objects in her mouth, combined with increased time spent on the floor, increases the likelihood that she will ingest certain chemicals and foreign bodies that collect on the floor. We’re talking about pesticides and carpet and floor cleaners, here.

For a birds eye view, parents should try getting down on their hands and knees and crawling around on the floor, pretending to be a ten-month-old. What’s that? A paper clip. I wonder what it tastes like. In the mouth it goes. Oh look, a dead roach. In the mouth it goes. What’s this? A pink pill my daddy dropped. Sure tastes good.

To be safe when giving medicines to a baby, parents need to know how to read drug labels and give their baby the correct dose. Parents also need to keep potential poisons out of sight. We’re talking about everything from furniture polish and insect poisons to plant fertilizer and ant traps.

Keeping our infants safe can seem like a full-time job. But, of course, it’s worth it.
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The Safe Kids USA web site was the primary source for this article.

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