

Newborn Babies and Sleep

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Congratulations on the birth of your new baby. This is a glorious time in your life – and a sleepless time too. Newborns have very different sleep needs than older babies. This article will help you understand your baby’s developing sleep patterns, and will help you have reasonable expectations for sleep.

Read, Learn, and Beware of Bad Advice

Absolutely everyone has an opinion about how you should handle sleep issues with your new baby. The danger to a new parent is that these tidbits of misguided advice (no matter how well-intentioned) can truly have a negative effect on our parenting skills and, by extension, our babies’ development...if we are not aware of the facts. The more knowledge you have the less likely that other people will make you doubt your parenting decisions.

When you have your facts straight, and when you have a parenting plan, you will be able to respond with confidence to those who are well-meaning but offering contrary or incorrect advice. So, your first step is to get smart! Know what you are doing, and know why you are doing it. Read books and magazines, attend classes or support groups – it all helps.

The Biology of Newborn Sleep

During the early months of your baby’s life, he sleeps when he is tired, it’s that simple. You can do little to force a new baby to sleep when he doesn’t want to sleep, and conversely, you can do little to wake him up when he is sleeping soundly.

Newborn babies have very tiny tummies. They grow rapidly, their diet is liquid, and it digests quickly. Although it would be nice to lay your little bundle down at bedtime and not hear from him until morning, this is not a realistic goal for a tiny baby. Newborns need to be fed every two to four hours — and sometimes more.

Sleeping “through the night”

You may believe that babies should start “sleeping through the night” soon after birth. For a new baby, a five-hour stretch is a full night. Many (but not all) babies can sleep uninterrupted from midnight to 5 a.m. (Not that they always do.) This may be a far cry from what you may have thought “sleeping through the night” meant!

What’s more, some sleep-through-the-nighters will suddenly begin waking more frequently, and it’s often a full year or even two until your baby will settle into an all-night, every night sleep pattern.

Falling Asleep at the Breast or Bottle

It is natural for a newborn to fall asleep while sucking at the breast, a bottle, or a pacifier. When a baby always falls asleep this way, he learns to associate sucking with falling asleep; over time, he cannot fall asleep any other way. This is probably the most natural, pleasant sleep association a baby can have. However, a large percentage of parents who are struggling with older babies who cannot fall asleep or stay asleep are fighting this powerful association.

Therefore, if you want your baby to be able to fall asleep without your help, it is essential that you sometimes let your newborn baby suck until he is sleepy, but not totally asleep. When you can, remove the breast, bottle, or pacifier from his mouth, and let him finish falling asleep without it. If you do this often enough, he will learn how to fall asleep without sucking.

Waking for Night Feedings

Many pediatricians recommend that parents shouldn't let a newborn sleep longer than four hours without feeding, and the majority of babies wake far more frequently than that. No matter what, your baby will wake up during the night. The key is to learn when you should pick her up for a feeding and when you can let her go back to sleep on her own.

Here's a tip that is important for you to know. Babies make many sleeping sounds, from grunts to whimpers to outright cries, and these noises don't always signal awakening. These are what I call sleeping noises, and your baby is asleep during these episodes.

Learn to differentiate between sleeping sounds and awake sounds. If she is awake and hungry, you'll want to feed her as quickly as possible so she'll go back to sleep easily. But if she's asleep – let her sleep!

Help Your Baby Distinguish Day from Night

A newborn sleeps sixteen to eighteen hours per day, and this sleep is distributed evenly over six to seven sleep periods. You can help your baby distinguish between night sleep and day sleep, and thus help him sleep longer periods at night.

Have your baby take his daytime naps in a lit room where he can hear the noises of the day. Make nighttime sleep dark and quiet, except for white noise (a background hum). You can also help your baby differentiate day from night by using a nightly bath and a change into pajamas to signal the difference between the two.

Watch for Signs of Tiredness

Get familiar with your baby's sleepy signals and put her down to sleep as soon as she seems tired. A baby who is encouraged to stay awake when her body is craving sleep is an unhappy baby. Over time, this pattern develops into sleep deprivation, which complicates developing sleep maturity. Learn to read your baby's sleepy signs -- such as quieting down, losing interest in people and toys, and fussing -- and put her to bed when that window of opportunity presents itself.

Make Yourself Comfortable

It's a fact that your baby will be waking you up, so you may as well make yourself as comfortable as possible. Relax about night wakings right now. Being frustrated about having to get up won't change a thing. The situation will improve day by day; and before you know it, your newborn won't be so little anymore — she'll be walking and talking and getting into everything in sight...during the day, and sleeping peacefully all night long.

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