

Newborn Babies and Sleep

Congratulations on the birth of your new baby. This is a glorious time in your life. Whether this is your first baby or your fifth, you will find this a time of recovery, adjustment, sometimes confusion and frustration, but — most wonderfully — of falling in love.

Babies younger than four months old have very different sleep needs than older babies. This article will help you understand your newborn baby's developing sleep patterns, and will help you develop reasonable expectations when it comes to your baby and 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 really that simple. You can do very 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.

A very important point to understand about newborn babies is that they have very, very tiny tummies. New babies grow rapidly, their diet is liquid, and it digests quickly. Formula digests quickly and breast milk digests even more rapidly. Although it would be nice to lay your little bundle down at a predetermined bedtime and not hear a peep from him until morning, even the most naïve among us know that this is not a realistic goal for a tiny baby. Newborns need to be fed every two to four hours — and sometimes more.

During those early months, your baby will have tremendous growth spurts that affect not only daytime, but also nighttime feeding as well, sometimes pushing that two- to four-hour schedule to a one- to two-hour schedule around the clock.

Sleeping “through the night”

You have probably heard that babies should start "sleeping through the night" at about two to four months of age. What you must understand is that, for a new baby, a five-hour stretch *is* a full night. Many (but nowhere near all) babies at this age *can* sleep uninterrupted from midnight to 5 a.m. (Not that they always do.) A far cry from what you may have thought "sleeping through the night" meant!

What's more, while the scientific definition of “sleeping through the night” is five hours, most of us wouldn't consider that anywhere near a full night's sleep for ourselves. Also, some of these sleep-through-the-nighters will suddenly begin waking more frequently, and it's often a full year or even two until your little one will settle into a mature, all-night, every night sleep pattern.

Falling Asleep at the Breast or Bottle

It is very 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. I have heard a number of sleep experts refer to this as a “negative sleep association.” I certainly disagree, and so would my baby. It is probably the most positive, 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 natural and powerful sucking-to-sleep 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 something in his mouth. When you do this, your baby may resist, root, and fuss to regain the nipple. It's perfectly okay to give him back the breast, bottle, or pacifier and start over a few minutes later. If you do this often enough, he will eventually learn how to fall asleep without sucking.

Waking for Night Feedings

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

This is a time when you need to focus your instincts and intuition. This is when you should try very hard to learn how to read your baby's signals. Here's a tip that is critically 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 nearly or even totally asleep during these episodes. I remember when my first baby, Angela, was a newborn. Her cry awakened me many times, yet she was asleep in my arms before I even made it from cradle to rocking chair. She was making sleeping noises. In my desire to respond to my baby's every cry, I actually taught her to wake up more often!

You need to listen and watch your baby carefully. Learn to differentiate between these sleeping sounds and awake and hungry sounds. If she is awake and hungry, you'll want to feed her as quickly as possible. If you respond immediately when she is hungry, she will most likely go back to sleep quickly. But, if you let her cry escalate, she will wake herself up totally, and it will be harder and take longer for her to go back to sleep. Not to mention that *you* will then be wide awake, too!

Help Your Baby Distinguish Day from Night

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

Begin by having your baby take his daytime naps in a lit room where he can hear the noises of the day, perhaps a bassinet or cradle located in the main area of your home. Make nighttime sleep dark and quiet. You can also help your baby differentiate day naps from night sleep by using a nightly bath and a change into sleeping pajamas to signal the difference between the two.

Watch for Signs of Tiredness

One way to encourage good sleep is to get familiar with your baby's sleepy signals and put her down to sleep as soon as she seems tired. A baby cannot put herself to sleep, nor can she understand her own sleepy signs. Yet a baby who is encouraged to stay awake when her body is craving sleep is typically an unhappy baby. Over time, this pattern develops into sleep deprivation, which further complicates your baby's 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

I've yet to hear a parent tell me that she or he loves getting up throughout the night to tend to a baby's needs. As much as we adore our little bundles, it's tough when you're woken up over and over again, night after night. Since it's a fact that your baby *will* be waking you up, you may as well make yourself as comfortable as possible. The first step is to learn to relax about night wakings right now. Being stressed or frustrated about having to get up won't change a thing. The situation will improve day by day; and before you know it, your little 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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