

Children's Services

Babies' Sleep Patterns

Each baby is different and will have different sleep needs. Some will have a regular sleep pattern – others will fuss and cry before settling down, then sleep erratically.

We sleep in cycles – stages of different kinds of sleep called Rapid Eye Movement (REM) and non-REM sleep. In the REM stage we move about – roll over, move our limbs etc – and then fall into a deeper sleep during the non-REM stage. Adults have a longer sleep cycle than infants – approximately 90 minutes compared to a baby's 40 minutes. We all wake up briefly after our deep sleep, and if everything is as we expect it to be then we go back into REM sleep – we don't even remember doing it when we wake up in the morning.

How do newborn babies sleep?

While pregnant, the mother's movements during the day often lull her baby to sleep. When the mother stops moving about at night, the baby wakes and is active, so after being born, a baby might take a few weeks to settle into the new routine of sleeping at night.

Newborn babies (0 – 2 months) sleep between 11 and 18 hours a day. It is normal in the first few weeks of life for a baby to sleep anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours at a time (breastfed babies tend to sleep for shorter periods of time – 2 – 3 hours compared to bottle-fed babies who sleep 3 – 4 hours).



How can I help my baby sleep?

When your baby reaches 2 – 4 months of age you will probably start to see a more regular sleep pattern. As they get older they need less sleep and will stay awake for longer periods of time. About one third of babies experience disrupted sleep and sometimes it can take hours to settle them into sleep – or they might wake frequently during the night. If sleep problems persist, contact your doctor or family health nurse for more help or advice.

Babies tell us they are tired in a number of ways, including:

- crying
- clenching their fists, or jerking their arms or legs
- yawning or rubbing their face and eyes appearing sleepy.

If you are having trouble getting baby to sleep, check for the obvious, such as:

- hunger – when was baby's last feed?
- thirst – particularly in warmer weather
- a wet or soiled nappy
- temperature too hot or too cold
- stomach-ache or wind pains
- other pain – eg ear ache or teething
- a noisy environment, or overstimulation – eg bright lights.

If you've checked all of the above and there doesn't appear to be anything wrong, try:

- playing soft music – classical music, relaxation sounds, or special CDs for baby
- wrapping (swaddling) baby in a light blanket or muslin cloth – some babies are reassured and feel more secure, and are less likely to startle themselves awake
- offering a dummy – some babies are soothed by comfort sucking
- rocking baby in your arms while talking or singing softly to them
- patting or rubbing gently on the back or bottom when they are already in their cot – babies like the rhythm, but it's important that you stop when they are soothed (if you keep doing it till they are asleep, they're not learning to settle themselves off to sleep)
- using a baby hammock, which allows your baby to feel reassured while you gently and rhythmically bounce the hammock
- massaging – ask your baby health nurse how to do this – using warmed olive, almond or apricot oil.

You might need to try all of these suggestions or a combination to see what works best for your baby.

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Brought to you by YWCA NSW supporting people at critical times. Authored by Liz Connors, Early Childhood Specialist, YWCA NSW

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continued

What about night-time feeding?

Babies – especially newborns – have small tummies and so they need less food more often. This can mean they wake during the night for a feed. Some are happy to feed and go straight back to sleep, while others find it difficult to settle again. Whatever your night-time routine, once it's established you need to stick with it – your baby will find it easier to settle back into sleep with a consistent routine. To help this happen:

- before you go to bed, have everything ready that you might need – eg set up the change table with nappies and wipes and a spare change of clothing (in case of accidents)
- if bottle-feeding, make up several bottles and put them in the fridge so they can be easily heated when needed
- don't leave baby crying for long – distressed babies are harder to feed and settle back into sleep
- keep lights low
- talk softly to your baby and avoid the temptation to play – keep activity to a minimum to avoid overstimulating your baby.

For further information about helping babies to sleep, see:

Mindell, JA & Owens, JA (2003) *A Clinical Guide to Pediatric Sleep: Diagnosis of Sleep Problems* Philadelphia Lippincott & Wilkins

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au –
'Sleep Problems – babies' fact sheet

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au –
'Sleep and your baby' fact sheet

www.askdrsears.com –
'8 Infant Sleep Facts Every Parent Should Know'

www.swsahs.nsw.gov.au/kaoritane –
'Sleep and Settling Strategies'



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