

## Sleep problems - babies

Around one-third of babies experience excessive disrupted sleep. One common problem is when the baby cries and doesn't settle when you are trying to put them to bed. Another common problem is night-time waking.

Young babies have tiny stomachs and need to feed frequently, even during the night. This wouldn't be such a problem for exhausted parents if the baby drifted back to sleep straight after a feed, but this isn't always the case. Some babies remain distressed and continue to cry for hours.

There are various strategies parents can use to help their baby to sleep better. Persistent problems may need professional advice.

### Check for obvious distractions

Your baby may be tired but distracted by physical discomfort. Always check for the following:

- Wet or dirty nappy
- Hunger
- Thirst, particularly in warm weather
- Overheating, particularly in winter when parents are more likely to add extra blankets to the cot
- Being too cold
- Environmental distractions such as noises, bright lights or television
- Pain, such as earache or teething.

### Signs of tiredness

It can be helpful to watch for 'cues' or signs that your baby may give you to indicate tiredness. These include:

- Changes in facial expression
- Minimal movements and little activity
- Grimacing
- Frowning
- Grizzling
- Sucking
- Clenched fists
- Jerky movements
- Crying
- Yawning
- Staring
- Rigid limbs.

When you see some of these tired signs, it is time for your baby to go to bed.

### Relaxation for your baby

It helps to soothe and relax your baby before you put them to bed for the night. Suggestions include:

- **Warm bath**
- **Baby massage** – use gently warmed olive oil.

- **Soft music** – perhaps play classical music with the lights dimmed, or a music box. Repetitive soft songs can also be very reassuring for the baby.
- **Rocking** – cradle your baby in your arms and talk softly to them.
- **Wrapping** – some babies under the age of four months feel more secure and cosy if they are gently wrapped in a light blanket. They are also less likely to jerk themselves awake. Make sure their arms are free and they can still put their hands up to their mouth.
- **Patting** – gently patting your baby on the back or bottom while they are in their cot might help to soothe them. Pat them long enough to soothe them, but not until they go to sleep.
- **Dummy** – some babies are soothed by comfort sucking.

## Night-time feeds

The aim is to feed your baby and get them back to sleep as quickly as possible, so that you can go back to bed. Suggestions include:

- Set up everything you will need before you go to bed (such as a fresh nappy and wipes).
- Don't leave your baby crying for long or they will be too distressed to feed properly.
- Keep the lights low and your voice to a whisper.
- Don't play with your baby and keep activity to a minimum.
- Return your baby to bed after the feed.

## Learned behaviour

In your attempts to get your baby to sleep, you may have established habits such as always rocking or feeding your baby to sleep. Some babies can become reliant on particular strategies that parents use and learn that this is part of going to sleep. They might resist any change to their routine. Decide on a new and manageable pre-bed routine for your baby and stick to it. Your baby will adapt in time.

## Overall behaviour patterns

If your baby has sleeping problems, it can be helpful to look at their overall patterns of behaviour. It may be that their daytime pattern of sleeping, feeding and playing contributes to their disrupted night-time behaviour. For example, feed and play with your baby when they wake up. Then, when they show signs of being tired, start settling them for a sleep.

## Change may be a challenge for you and your baby

If you decide to change your patterns and help your baby learn to sleep by themselves, your baby may cry to express discomfort with the change. Change to their familiar routine may prompt resistance. Be patient.

If your new routine doesn't seem to be working, don't lose hope and revert back to your old methods. Check that you are sure about what you are doing, persist and remember that your baby will soon become familiar with the new routine. Seek professional advice and reassurance if necessary.

## Handling your stress

When you are exhausted, a persistently crying baby can move you to frustration and anger. If you ever feel overwhelmed with strong emotion, put the baby in a safe place (such as their cot) and leave the room immediately. You need to give yourself a chance to calm down.

Suggestions include:

- Take a shower.
- Play music loud enough to drown out the sounds of crying.
- Make yourself a warm drink.
- Call a friend.
- Call Parentline on 132 289.
- Call the Maternal and Child Health Line on 132 229.
- If someone else can stay in the house, go for a walk.
- Practise deep breathing and make a conscious effort to calm down.

- Remind yourself that your baby isn't deliberately crying to annoy you – crying is their only means of communication.
- Seek professional advice on how to solve your baby's sleeping problems.

## Where to get help

- Maternal and child health nurse
- Your doctor
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Maternal and Child Health Line Tel. 132 229
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577

## Things to remember

- Around one-third of babies experience a disrupted sleeping pattern.
- Sleeping habits are learned, so decide on a new pre-bed routine for your baby and stick to it.
- Relaxation suggestions include playing soft music or giving your baby a warm bath or massage.
- Change can be hard for you and your baby.
- Persistent sleeping problems may need professional advice.

**This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:**

Tweddle Child and Family Health Services

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