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## Sleep and your baby

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### Summary

- Around one third of babies experience a disrupted sleeping pattern.
- Sleeping habits are learned, so try to set up a bedtime routine for your baby as soon as you can, and stick to it.
- Bedtime relaxation suggestions include playing soft music or giving your baby a warm bath or massage.
- If your baby's sleeping problems persist, seek professional advice.
- The sleepless nights will eventually come to an end.

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Newborn babies need feeding and changing at regular intervals, 24 hours a day. The biggest challenge facing new parents is coping with broken sleep, night after night. It is worth remembering that the sleepless nights don't last. Your baby will eventually settle into a pattern of sleeping through the night if they are used to a familiar routine.

Difficulties with your baby settling and sleeping are common. Around one third of babies experience a disrupted sleeping pattern, but it is only a problem if you feel that the family can't cope with the disruption. Some families do not consider a disrupted sleep pattern to be a problem.

### Coping with baby settling and sleep difficulties

If you are experiencing settling or sleep difficulties with your baby, it may help to:

- Learn about the stages of development your baby is going through. This will help you to understand and have reasonable expectations of your baby.
- Try to recognise any patterns in your baby's sleep behaviour.
- Avoid letting your baby become overtired.
- Spend time winding down with your baby before settling them.
- Check that your baby has a clean, dry nappy, is fed, and is not too cold or too hot.
- Try to settle your baby into their cot while they are still awake.
- When your baby wakes up after only a short time, try to extend the sleep by resettling.
- Look after yourself and sleep when you can.
- Share the load – it's important for parents to support each other.

If you are concerned, get advice or help early. Sleep deprivation can cause stress and conflict for exhausted parents and families. Professional help is available. Through the use of settling strategies, you may be able to alter your baby's sleep pattern.

### Sleep suggestions for babies up to six months of age

Tips for settling your young baby include:

- Try to get your baby to nap at the same times each day.
- Decide on a routine for your baby and try to stick to it – night-time sleeping patterns are learned.
- Relax your baby before bed with massage, bathing, dim light or soft music.
- Set out clean nappies, wipes and a change of baby clothes before you go to bed, so you won't have to search around for them in the night.

For sleep safety, always put your baby to sleep on their back, with their feet at the end of the cot. Make sure their face is not covered, their mattress fits the cot well and their cot is free of toys and bumpers.

Visit the Better Health Channel's page on [sudden unexpected death in infants](#) for more information about safe sleeping for babies.

### **Sleep suggestions for babies from six to 12 months of age**

Some suggestions for settling your older baby include:

- Continue to stick to a regular night-time routine.
- Once you lay your baby down, leave the room. Avoid drawing out your goodnights or establishing bedtime as 'chat time'.
- A hungry baby will wake more often, so make sure your baby is eating enough during the day.

### **Sleep-time relaxation for your baby**

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

- **a warm bath**
- **baby massage** – use gently warmed olive oil
- **soft music** – for example, play classical music quietly with the lights dimmed. Repetitive soft songs can also be very reassuring
- **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 muslin or light cotton wrap. They are also less likely to jerk themselves awake with random arm movements. When wrapping your baby, make sure they have enough room to expand their chest to breathe, and to allow their legs to bend at the hips
- **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
- **a dummy** – some babies are soothed by comfort sucking.

### **Check for sleep-time distractions**

Always check for sleep-time distractions such as:

- a 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
- noises, bright lights or television
- pain, such as earache or teething.

### **Signs of tiredness from your baby**

Watch for 'cues' or signs that your baby is tired. These include:

- 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. Putting your baby to bed before they become overtired may help them to settle more easily.

### **Night-time feeds for young babies**

Young babies have tiny stomachs and need to feed frequently, even during the night. Unfortunately some babies remain distressed after a feed and continue to cry. Aim 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.

### **Sleep suggestions for toddlers and preschoolers**

You can settle your toddler or preschool child in the following ways:

- Keep the bed for sleeping only, not for playing or relaxing.
- Don't punish children by sending them to their room, or they will feel badly about going to bed at night.
- Cut out or limit any naps later than mid-afternoon.
- If the dark makes your child anxious, a night-light can help.
- Occasionally review bedtime routines to make sure you're keeping up with your child's growing maturity.

### **Night-time crying in toddlers and preschoolers**

If your child wakes overnight and does not resettle themselves, some child care experts recommend trying a responsive settling approach. Note that responsive settling is not recommended for babies under six months old and some experts recommend against responsive settling.

Responsive settling involves:

- when your child is crying, waiting a few minutes before entering the room to give the child an opportunity to self-settle
- reassuring and soothing the child, but trying not to pick them up. Leaving the room quickly
- if your child keeps crying or starts crying again, waiting for a short period of time before going in again.

Continue to be guided by your child's behaviour. If your child remains distressed, continue to reassure and soothe them as required. You may need to pick them up and give them a cuddle to reassure them before placing them back in their bed.

Your maternal and child health nurse or GP can offer further support and information with this and other sleep and settling approaches and can tailor an approach that is right for you and your child.

### **Babies and learned sleep 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.

If your baby has sleeping difficulties, 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, in the day, feed and play with your baby when they wake up. Then, when they show signs of being

tired, start settling them for a sleep.

### **Changes to sleep patterns 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.

### **Sleep deprivation and handling your emotions**

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 **13 22 89**.
- Call the **Maternal and Child Health Line** on **13 22 89**.
- If someone else can stay in the house with your baby, 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**

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. **1300 60 60 24** – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- **Paediatrician**
- Your maternal and Child Health nurse
- **Maternal and Child Health Line** (24 hours) Tel. **13 22 29**
- **Tweddle Child and Family Health Service** Tel. **(03) 9689 1577**
- **Parentline** Tel. **13 22 89**

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