

# Crying: Understanding and coping with your baby's crying



Image credit: Adobe Stock

**Summary:** Having a baby is one of the most wonderful experiences in the world, yet at the same time, a crying baby can be one of the most stressful experiences. The good news, is that there are many ways to soothe a crying baby, which includes gently rocking, walking, or bouncing your baby; cuddling your baby "skin to skin; giving your baby a bath; going for a walk with your baby in a carrier or stroller; massaging your baby's back, arms, or legs; smiling, singing, humming or talking quietly; creating white noise (with a fan or vacuum); taking your baby for a ride in the car; giving a pacifier once breastfeeding is established.

## Why do babies cry?

Babies don't cry like this unless something's wrong... right?" Wrong!

Babies can cry for many reasons:

- Hunger
- Gas pains
- Tired
- Need to burp
- Need to cuddle with an adult

Sometimes babies cry (a lot) even when nothing is wrong. Your baby may keep on crying, even when you've tried everything you can think of to soothe her. This is called 'inconsolable crying', and can be very frustrating and worrisome for parents.

If you're having trouble soothing your baby's crying, speak with your doctor to make sure your baby is healthy.

## So what's normal?

Many studies show that crying in a normal, healthy baby:

- Begins to increase at 2 weeks of age
- Peaks at 6-8 weeks of life, and decreases after that

- Comes and goes for no apparent reason
- Can continue, even when parents do everything they can to soothe the baby
- Can look like the baby is in pain (even when he is not)
- Happens more often in the late afternoon or evening
- Can last 30-40 minutes or longer at a time (and can total up to 5 hours a day or more)
- If your baby cries a lot now, it doesn't mean that she is going to cry a lot or be difficult when he's older.

## What is 'colic'?

---

'Colic' isn't a disease. It really just describes babies who cry a lot. The way this word was used in the past made many people think that it was an illness or disorder. We know now that healthy babies can cry a lot, and there isn't anything wrong with them (or with you!).

So crying is usually the worst at around 2 months, and gradually gets better after that. What's the most important thing to remember? It does get better.

## Comforting your crying baby

---

Understanding that crying is normal is one thing, coping with inconsolable crying is another. Your baby needs you close when he is crying. It's important to keep trying to soothe your baby, but take a break when you're feeling frustrated.

You might be very worried about your baby's crying, and may think that stopping breastfeeding, switching formula or adjusting medications may help. Please speak with your doctor or nurse first. Most of the time, your baby's crying is not related to feeding issues.

## Ways to soothe your baby

---

Some things work most of the time, but nothing works all of the time. Even the soothing techniques that work, may only work for a short time. When your baby cries check if she is:

- Hungry or wet
- Too warm or too cold
- Gassy or needs burping
- Lying in an uncomfortable position
- Bored and needs a change of position, activity, or place
- Overwhelmed (things are too loud, too bright, or there is too much going on)

If your baby is still crying, you can try other ways to comfort him, like:

- Gently rocking, walking, or bouncing your baby
- Cuddling your baby "skin to skin"
- Giving your baby a bath
- Going for a walk with your baby in a carrier or stroller
- Massaging your baby's back, arms, or legs
- Smiling, singing, humming or talking quietly
- Creating white noise (with a fan or vacuum)
- Taking your baby for a ride in the car
- Giving a pacifier once breastfeeding is established

Babies like these soothing techniques even when they are not crying, and these may prevent crying. For example, babies who spend a lot of time being carried close to their parents' bodies usually cry less. These soothing techniques are good for your baby even when they don't stop the crying. They help your baby to develop a strong bond with you. Comforting your baby when she cries also teaches her that she can count on someone to try to help her when she needs it. You can't spoil a baby with love and comfort!

## What to do if you are feeling frustrated and angry

---

Taking care of a new baby is hard, especially if you're not getting enough sleep. All parents feel frustrated sometimes. Crying is a common reason for parents to feel frustrated, especially when they have done everything they can think of to comfort their baby.

Before you get into a situation where you feel very frustrated with your baby's crying, make a plan for what you will do when things are difficult. Write your plan down and hang it on the wall or fridge so you can look at it when needed. You can even print this page and refer to the soothing techniques above.

### **Plan ahead for frustration...**

When you're frustrated, your plan could be:

- Put your baby down in a safe place (like a crib) and walk away for a few minutes.
- Check on your baby every few minutes but don't pick him up until you feel calmer.
- Do something to make yourself feel better during this time (lie down, listen to music, or have a snack).
- Call someone to help (your partner, friend, neighbour, or family member).
- It's also important that anyone caring for your baby has a plan to handle their frustration when your baby cries.

### **Make sure that anyone who cares for your baby:**

- Is comfortable caring for babies
- Has some experience with babies Knows how to comfort a crying baby
- Can handle the frustration that goes along with looking after babies
- Understands that crying is normal, and that the baby is not crying 'on purpose'
- Knows what to do when they are feeling frustrated

### **Parents need soothing too!**

Some ways to calm yourself:

- Take some long, slow, deep breaths Listen to music with earphones (if you have to, you can even do this while holding your baby)
- Talk with supportive friends and family members
- Remind yourself that there is a light at the end of the tunnel-this period of intense crying will not last forever
- Eat a healthy snack and drink water, juice or milk to re-charge your batteries

While your baby is sleeping, or if someone is looking after your baby for you:

- Grab a nap. Even 20 or 30 minutes can make a big difference.
- Take a warm bath
- Watch a favourite TV show - especially something that makes you laugh!
- Break a sweat. Do some push-ups, sit-ups, or exercise along with a video. Get a yoga book and try a few poses. Or try a yoga class.
- Spend some time on a hobby or activity that you really enjoy.

### **Get extra help if you need it!**

As a parent, you may also have other stresses in your life, in addition to looking after a new baby. There might be financial problems, conflict with a spouse, mental health problems or an addiction, among others.

Ways to get help include:

- Talk to a trusted family member, partner or friend.
- Speak with your family doctor or pediatrician.

## Authors

---

Written by the health professionals at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO).