

Your Colicky Baby

Your baby cries every evening for hours at a time, and the crying has worn you down to the point where you feel like joining in. What could be upsetting your child?

All newborns cry and show some fussiness. But when a baby who is otherwise healthy cries for more than 3 hours per day, more than 3 days per week for at least 3 weeks, it is a condition defined as colic. Colic usually doesn't have any medical significance and eventually goes away on its own.

About Colic

It's estimated that up to 40% of all infants have colic. It usually starts between the 3rd and 6th week after birth and ends by the time the baby is 3 to 4 months old. If the baby is still crying excessively after that, another health problem may be to blame.

Here are some key facts about colic:

- Colicky babies have a healthy sucking reflex and a good appetite and are otherwise healthy and growing well. Call your doctor if your baby isn't feeding well or doesn't have a strong sucking reflex.
- Colicky babies like to be cuddled and handled. Call your doctor if your baby seems uncomfortable when handled or is difficult to console.
- Colicky babies may spit up from time to time, but if your baby is actually vomiting and/or losing weight, call the doctor. (Vomiting is a forceful throwing up of stomach contents through the mouth, whereas spitting up is an easy flow of stomach contents out of the mouth.) Vomiting repeatedly is not a sign of colic.
- Colicky babies typically have normal stools. If your baby has diarrhea or blood in the stool, call your doctor.

What Causes Colic?

Doctors aren't sure what causes colic. Cow's milk intolerance has been suggested as a possible culprit, but doctors now believe that this is rarely the case. Breastfed babies get colic too; in these cases, dietary changes by the mother may help the colic to subside. Some breastfeeding women find that getting rid of caffeine in their diet helps, while others see improvements when they eliminate dairy, soy, egg, or wheat products.

Some colicky babies also have gas, but it's not clear if the gas causes colic or if the babies develop gas as a result of swallowing too much air while crying.

Some theories suggest that colic occurs when food moves too quickly through a baby's digestive system or is incompletely digested. Other theories are that colic is due to a baby's temperament, that some babies just take a little bit longer to get adjusted to the world, or that some have undiagnosed gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). It's also been found that infants of mothers who smoke are more likely to have colic.

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Treating Colic

No single treatment has proved to make colic go away. But there are ways to make life easier for both you and your colicky baby.

First, if your baby is not hungry, don't try to continue the feeding. Instead, try to console your little one — you won't be "spoiling" the baby with the attention. You can also:

- Walk with your baby or sit in a rocking chair, trying various positions.
- Try burping your baby more often during feedings.
- Place your baby across your lap on his or her belly and rub your baby's back.
- Put your baby in a swing or vibrating seat. The motion may have a soothing effect.
- Put your baby in an infant car seat in the back of the car and go for a ride. The vibration and movement of the car are often calming.
- Play music tapes — some babies respond to sound as well as movement.
- Place your baby in the same room as a running clothes dryer, white noise machine, or vacuum — some infants find the low constant noise soothing.
- Some babies need decreased stimulation and may do well swaddled, in a darkened room.

Caring for a colicky baby can be extremely frustrating, so be sure to take care of yourself, too. Don't blame yourself or your baby for the constant crying — colic is nobody's fault. Try to relax, and remember that your baby will eventually outgrow this phase.

In the meantime, if you need a break from your baby's crying, take one. Friends and relatives are often happy to watch your baby when you need some time to yourself. If no one is immediately available, it's OK to put the baby down in the crib and take a break before making another attempt at consolation. If at any time you feel like you might hurt yourself or the baby, put the baby down in the crib and call for help immediately.

If the baby has a temperature of 100.4°F (38°C) or more, is crying for more than 2 hours at a time, is inconsolable, isn't feeding well, has diarrhea or persistent vomiting, or is less awake or alert than usual, call your doctor right away. You should also call your doctor if you're unsure whether your baby's crying is colic or a symptom of another illness.

Adapted from www.kidshealth.org