

# Colic in babies

*This leaflet provides information and advice for parents of newborns with colic.*

## What is colic?

Colic is not a disease but a term to describe unsoothable and persistent crying in healthy newborns. All babies get fussy and cry sometimes, but babies with colic cry a lot harder and longer than those without colic.

Colic is common in infants, affecting approximately 1 in 5 babies. It usually starts 2–5 weeks after birth and goes away when the baby is about 3–5 months old. Colicky babies generally cry in spells, typically beginning in the early evenings.

## How do I know it's a colic and not normal crying?

Colicky babies cry louder, more intensely and at a higher pitch than those without colic. During a colic spell, your baby might be:

- Crying to the point of screaming
- Inconsolable; nothing you do lessens the crying
- Red or flushed in the face
- Bringing the knees up to the tummy, arching the back, clenching the fists, or stiffening the arms

Colic is generally defined as inconsolable crying of a healthy baby for more than **3 hours** per day for more than **3 days** per week for more than **3 weeks** ('rule of three').

## What causes colic?

Doctors and researchers aren't sure what causes colic. However, they have identified several factors that may contribute, including:



**Digestive system:** Your baby's gastrointestinal system needs some time to get used to breaking down food. So, initially, some food may stay undigested and make your baby gassy, resulting in pain and discomfort from the trapped winds.



**Overstimulation:** In the first few weeks after birth, newborns can tune out sights and sounds in their surroundings. After about four weeks, this in-built mechanism disappears and leaves your baby more sensitive to any stimuli around them. This can be overwhelming for your baby, and it may cry to release the stress.



**Food allergies:** Some newborns develop colic because of food allergies or sensitivities. In formula-fed babies, the allergen could be cow's milk proteins (lactose); in breast-fed babies, it might be specific foods in the mother's diet.



**Acid reflux:** In some newborns, the muscle that keeps stomach acid from flowing into the throat or mouth is not fully developed yet. This can trigger episodes of colic, even though it does not cause them.

## Seeing a doctor

Colic will go away eventually without treatment. However, excessive crying can also be a sign of a condition or illness that causes your baby pain or discomfort. If your baby shows colic symptoms, schedule an appointment with your child's doctor to rule out any health issues.

### How can I prepare for the appointment?

Many parents find it helpful to write down questions they have for the doctor ahead of the appointment. Beyond that, you can help the doctor by recording the following information:

- When the excessive crying first started
- How long and when (time of the day) your baby cries
- When your baby is feeding and sleeping during the day and night
- How your baby behaves before, during and after the crying spells
- Any strategies you have tried to soothe your baby
- Who else is caring for your baby (grandparents, babysitter, etc.)

### What does the doctor do?

There is no test that identifies colic as the cause for the crying. So, the doctor will ask you questions about your baby's behaviour and do a thorough physical exam to identify any possible causes for your child's distress.

The **physical exam** may include:



**Measuring** your baby's height, head circumference, and weight



**Listening** to your baby's heartbeat, lungs, and tummy sounds



**Examine** your baby's limbs, eyes, ears, and genitals



**Assess** how your baby reacts to touch and movement



**Check** for any signs of rash, inflammations, infections, or allergies

Apart from the physical exam, the doctor will rely on your description to diagnose your baby. So, they may **ask you lots of questions**, including:


- How many times per week does your baby cry excessively?
- At what time of the day do the crying spells occur, and how long do they last?
- What does a typical crying spell look like? Does your baby's body tense up?
- What does your baby's cry sound like during a crying spell?
- Does your baby ever seem to struggle breathing during the crying spells?
- What and how often do you feed your baby?
- Does your baby have any problems with eating?
- Does your baby cry right after eating?
- How much and how often does your baby spit up?
- What have you tried to soothe your baby, and how well did it work?
- How do you and your family cope with your baby's excessive crying?

Your answers to these questions will help the doctor determine if your baby has colic or if an underlying condition causes your baby pain or discomfort.

## Soothing a colicky baby

As the cause for colic is unclear, there is no treatment. However, your healthcare provider will be able to advise you on strategies to soothe your baby and lessen the severity and duration of the crying spells.

Such soothing strategies may include:

-  Burp your baby **more often** during and after every feed to help release trapped air.
-  If you bottle-feed, try **other types of bottles** to see if your baby swallows less air.
-  **Sit up your baby** as straight as possible during feeding to minimise the amount of air they are swallowing.
-  Create a **calming atmosphere** to avoid overstimulation of your baby. This may include dimming the lights, switching off any sources of noise, and calming yourself down.
-  **Hold your baby close to your chest** so they can hear your heartbeat. Take deep, long breaths – the calmer you are, the easier it is for your baby to calm down.
-  **Massage** your baby's tummy or back with gentle circular strokes.
-  Give your baby a **warm bath**.
-  **Sing or talk** to your baby.
-  **Gently rock** your baby. You can use a swinging crib, rocking or vibrating chair, or a gymnastics ball to help with the movement and avoid tiring yourself out.
-  Offer your baby a **pacifier**.
-  Put your baby in a stroller and **go for a walk**.
-  Put your baby in an **infant car seat** in the back of the car and go for a **ride**. The movement of the car can be calming to a fussy child.

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You may find that some of these strategies work well on some days and not at all on others. That is normal and nothing to worry about. If you find that yesterday's technique does not work, just try something different.

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## Taking care of yourself

Caring for a baby with colic can be exhausting and stressful. Many parents report feeling helpless, overwhelmed and sometimes resentful toward the crying baby. So, it is important that you look after your own wellbeing.

### Self-care tips

The following tips may help you cope with the emotional and practical demands of caring for a baby with colic:



**Take breaks.** It is okay to leave the room for 10 minutes to collect yourself. Leave your baby in the crib or playpen without blankets or stuffed toys and close the door behind you. Do something for yourself during that break, such as reading or listening to music.



**Actively relax.** Consider using relaxation techniques such as yoga and breathing exercises. There are many free instruction videos on the Internet that you may find helpful for this.



**Take care of your body.** You may find it hard to make time for exercise and eating healthily. However, it will make a tremendous difference to your energy levels and overall wellbeing. So, try staying active and get some fresh food and air every day.



**Find support.** Ask your friends, family, or a babysitter to take over for a while. If you can, leave the house while your baby is taken care of by others.



**Be kind to yourself.** Many parents struggle with self-judgment. It may be helpful to remember that the crying is not a sign of bad parenting or your baby rejecting you. It is a natural behaviour that will eventually go away.



**Share your experience.** Let the people around you know how you are feeling and what they can do to support you. You may also find it helpful to talk to other parents who go through a similar experience.

If you ever feel so overwhelmed that you might hurt yourself or the baby, put the child down and call for help immediately.

### External support

Your healthcare team will be able to advise you where to find further information and support. You may also find the following website and organisations useful:

- <https://www.allbabiescry.com>
- <https://www.cry-sis.org.uk>
- <https://www.nct.org.uk>

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#### References

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