



Crying and Colic

What it means when your baby is fussy

It is normal for a baby to get fussy. This handout explains why babies cry and what parents can do to help. It also explains the difference between normal fussiness and colic.

Any Cry Is a Call for Help

Crying is one way that babies communicate with their parents. When a baby cries, it means there is some problem that needs fixing.

Why do babies cry?

Babies may cry because they are:

- In pain (they may have gas)
- Feeling discomfort (they may be hungry, wet, or cold)
- Fatigued (they may be overstimulated and unable to go to sleep)
- Sick (they may have a fever, rash, jaundice, or infection – see “Warning Signs After Birth” in *Caring for Yourself and Your New Baby*)

Sometimes when babies cry, there does not seem to be a reason. This crying may be a way for them to release tension – or, it may be colic.

How do I know what my baby needs when my baby cries?

It is natural for you to want to find out what is causing your baby to cry and to try to fix the problem. Often, you will need to try different things as you are learning about your baby’s needs. When you find a solution that works, that is usually what you will try first the next time. Being able to help your baby stop crying helps you feel capable.

Evening Fussiness Is Not Colic

Between 3 and 12 weeks, most babies become very fussy in the late afternoon and evening. Getting them to stop crying may be difficult, and this can be very hard to handle.

Pediatricians used to call this fussiness “colic.” But, this fussiness is not colic. It is normal, and it occurs in about 85% (85 out of 100) of healthy babies.

Why Babies Are Fussy

Most babies get fussy. It is part of how they adapt to being in the world.

A newborn baby's nervous system is not yet fully developed. This makes it hard for a baby to take in all the new sights, sounds, and smells it experiences every day.

By evening, the baby's nervous system may be overloaded, and the result is shorter and shorter feeding and sleeping periods. This can build up until the baby finally needs to "blow off steam" by becoming fussy.

What can I do for my fussy baby?

The first step is learning as much as you can about why babies are fussy. This will help you:

- Know ahead of time when your baby may be fussy
- Understand how being fussy is helping your baby
- Feel less anxiety if you cannot soothe your baby
- Avoid overreacting and causing your baby more stress

When your baby is fussy, you can try:

- Soothing methods such as swaddling, shushing, bouncing, cuddling or walking around while you are holding your baby
- Feeding
- Changing your baby's diaper

If you know that your baby is not wet, in pain, or hungry, use soothing methods or just let your baby cry. One to 2 hours of normal fussing can easily become 4 to 6 hours if you get too anxious and overload your baby with too much handling and extra stimulation.

When babies are past this fussy period (after 3 to 12 weeks), they often start sleeping better and longer.

What is colic?

Colic is when a baby is very fussy and has crying that is intense and lasts for many hours at a time. It may be caused by abdominal pain, but there may be other causes that we do not fully understand.

When babies cry a lot, it is very hard on parents. It is normal to:

- Feel anxious or fearful
- Feel upset if you cannot fix what is wrong
- Be angry

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Perinatal Education:
206-598-4003

Maternal and Infant
Care Clinic:
206-598-4070

What are some ways to cope with colic?

- Hold your baby and walk around.
- Place your baby in a mechanical rocker or swing. The way these move is similar to the swaying or rocking a baby feels in the womb.
- Give your baby a bath.
- Ask your partner or other support person to take turns holding your baby.
- Know how much crying you can handle. Know when to take a break or get help from your family or friends.
- Make a plan about what you will do if your baby's crying gets out of hand and you reach your limit.
- Line up support ahead of time.
- Remember the 5 S's:
 - Swaddling
 - Side or stomach
 - Shushing
 - Swinging
 - Sucking

To Learn More

To learn more about how to calm your crying baby and help your baby sleep, read the book or watch the DVD called *Happiest Baby on the Block*, by Harvey Karp, M.D. Visit Dr. Karp's website at www.happiestbaby.com for excerpts from the book and DVD. The site also has contact information for certified Happiest Baby Educators in the Seattle area.

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