

Understanding Infant Sleep: A Guide for New Parents



Highlights

Your baby needs your help to relax and fall asleep. As they get older, they will learn how to settle themselves.

Before putting your baby to sleep, check that they've had a feed and a nappy change. Ensure they are not too hot or cold.

It can take time to get into a routine. 'Feed-play-sleep' is a good pattern to follow.

Put your baby down to sleep as soon as you notice their tired signs, like frowning, yawning, or jerky movements.

A bedtime routine helps your baby know it's time to sleep. This might include a bath, story, and cuddle.

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Sleep needs by age

How much sleep does my baby need?

Babies need plenty of sleep to help them grow and develop. Some babies sleep more than others. Some sleep for long periods, while others sleep in short bursts. As your baby gets older, they will sleep less during the day and more at night.

Here is the average amount of sleep babies and toddlers need during a 24-hour period:

Birth to 3 months: 15 to 18 hours

3 to 6 months: 15 to 16 hours

6 to 12 months: 13 to 14 hours, including a longer sleep at night

1 to 2 years: 12 to 14 hours, including 1 or 2 daytime naps

2 to 3 years: 12 to 13 hours, including 1 daytime nap

3 to 5 years: 12 to 13 hours, possibly with a daytime nap

Creating healthy sleep habits

How can I help my baby develop good sleep habits?

Safe sleeping

It is recommended that babies sleep in a cot or bassinet in the same room as an adult for the first 6 months to lower the risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Always place your baby to sleep on their back with their head and face uncovered. This should be done every time they sleep - day or night. Keep the room smoke-free.

Help your baby get used to night and day being different

During the day, talk and play with your baby when they are awake.

At night, try:

Lowering the lights

Not talking much and keeping your voice quiet

Putting your baby down right after feeding and changing them, without playing

Recognising your baby's sleep cues

Look out for tired signs

Your baby will show signs that they are getting tired. These include:

Grimacing and frowning

Yawning

Grizzling, fussiness, or crying

Staring

Jerky movements and arching their back

Clenching their fists

Rubbing their eyes

Signs your baby is tired

Try to put your baby down as soon as they show these tired signs. This prevents distress and makes it easier for them to fall asleep.

Tips for setting a calm bedtime routine

Establish a daily routine

Newborn babies need to eat and sleep throughout the day and night. It can be helpful to have a routine, but it's important to be flexible. You can try to time your baby's activities to suit your schedule, but it may take time to settle into a routine.

During the day, a good pattern is 'feed-play-sleep'. After feeding and changing, your baby will probably be alert and happy. This is a good time to play before they go to sleep.

At night, you might try waking your baby for a feed just before you go to bed.

This can help them - and you - sleep a bit longer.

Establish a bedtime routine

When your baby is 4 to 6 months old, you may feel ready to introduce a bedtime routine. A simple, soothing routine can help your baby feel secure and understand when it's time to sleep. You can try:

A warm bath

Reading a bedtime story

A breastfeed or bottle feed

Giving a goodnight kiss and cuddle

Singing a lullaby or turning on quiet music or a wind-up mobile

Tools and Assistance

Keep a sleep diary to track your baby's sleep and identify patterns over time

Observe your baby's behavior closely for early signs of tiredness

Use gentle music, white noise, or soft lighting to create a calming sleep environment

Offer a consistent sleep space - the same cot or bassinet helps build familiarity

Practice patience; establishing routines and habits takes time and adjustment