



Bathing Your Baby

By: Dipesh Navsaria, MPH, MSLIS, MD, FAAP

Bathing your baby is an experience many parents treasure. It's a great time to bond, distraction-free, as your tiny new family member enjoys the sensation of warm water on their skin. Yet this common parenting ritual often comes with questions, and sometimes anxiety, about when and how to do it well.

Here are some frequently asked questions from parents about topics related to baby bath timing, frequency, safety, and more.



When should newborns get their first bath?

The timing of your baby's very first bath has changed over the last few years. While most institutions used to bathe babies within an hour or two of birth, many are changing their policies.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends (<https://extranet.who.int/rhl/topics/newborn-health/care-newborn-infant/who-recommendation-bathing-and-other-immediate-postnatal-care-newborn>) delaying baby's first bath until 24 hours after birth—or waiting at least 6 hours if a full day isn't possible for cultural reasons.

Why wait?

Here are some reasons why it is now recommended to delay baby's first bath:

- **Body temperature and blood sugar:** Babies who get baths right away may be more likely to become cold and develop hypothermia ([/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Cold-Weather-Safety.aspx](#)). The minor stress of an early bath can also make some babies more likely to have a drop in blood sugar (hypoglycemia ([/English/health-issues/conditions/chronic/Pages/Causes-of-High-Blood-Glucose-and-Low-Blood-Glucose.aspx](#))).
- **Bonding and breastfeeding:** Taking the baby away for a bath too soon can interrupt skin-to-skin care, mother-child bonding, and early breastfeeding success. One study (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23635002>) showed a 166% increase in hospital breastfeeding success after implementing a 12-hour delay in baby's first bath compared to those bathed within the first couple hours.
- **Dry skin:** Vernix, a waxy white substance that coats a baby's skin before birth, acts as a natural moisturizer and may have anti-bacterial properties. Learn more about vernix [here](#). (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4668496/>) According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), it's best to leave vernix on a newborns' skin for a while to help prevent their delicate skin from drying out. This is especially important for preemies, as their skin is highly prone to injury.

Note: Babies of mothers with HIV or the Hepatitis viruses will still be bathed after the initial breastfeed in order to decrease risk to hospital staff and family members.

How often do babies need a bath once they are home?

Newborns don't need a bath every day. They rarely sweat or get dirty enough to need a full bath that often.

Three baths per week during baby's first year may be enough. Bathing more frequently can dry out your baby's skin.

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Can my baby have a bath before the umbilical cord falls off?

Only give your newborn sponge baths until the stump of the umbilical cord falls off, which usually happens by about one or two weeks of age. If it remains beyond that time, there may be other issues at play. See the baby's doctor if the cord has not dried up and fallen off by the time the baby is two months old. Learn more here ([/English/ages-stages/baby/bathing-skin-care/Pages/Umbilical-Cord-Care.aspx](#)).

How to give a sponge bath

A sponge bath is like a regular bath, except you don't put your baby in the water.

Baby sponge bath safety tips:

- **Get supplies ready before you begin.** Have a basin of water, a damp washcloth rinsed in soap-free water, a dry towel, and anything else you might need within reach before you begin.
- **Lay baby on a flat surface that is comfortable for both of you**—a changing table, bed, floor, or counter next to the sink will do. Pad hard surfaces with a blanket or fluffy towel. If your baby is on a surface above the floor, always use a safety strap or keep one hand on her to prevent falls.
- **Start washing the face first.** Use the dampened cloth to wash her face, being careful not to get water into her eyes or mouth. Then, dip it in the basin of water before washing the rest of her body and, finally, the diaper area.
- **Keep baby warm.** During the sponge bath, wrap your baby in a dry towel and uncover only the parts of her body you are actively washing. Pay special attention to creases under the arms, behind the ears, around the neck, and, especially with a girl, in the genital area.

When is my baby ready for a regular bath?

Once the umbilical area is healed, you can try placing your baby directly in the water. His first baths should be as gentle and brief as possible. He may protest a little. (If this happens go back to sponge baths for a week or two, then try the bath again). Babies usually make it clear when they're ready.

Baby bathtub safety tips:

- **Use an infant tub or sink.** The US Consumer Product Safety Commission recommends a hard plastic baby bathtub that has a sloped, textured surface or sling that keeps your baby from sliding. Only use an infant bath tub manufactured on or after October 2, 2017 so it meets current safety standards (<https://www.cpsc.gov/content/new-federal-safety-standard-for-infant-bath-tubs-takes-effect>). Some parents find it easiest to bathe a newborn in a bathinette, sink, or plastic tub lined with a clean towel. Yes, a sink! Sometimes easiest is best; just be careful. Sinks are slippery and have all sorts of things sticking out like faucets and handles.
 - **Avoid using bath seats.** These seats provide support so a child can sit upright in an adult bathtub. Unfortunately, they can easily tip over. A child can fall into the bathwater and drown.
- **Use touch supervision.** Have a towel and other bath supplies (</English/ages-stages/baby/bathing-skin-care/Pages/Preparing-Your-Bathing-Area.aspx>) within reach so you can keep a hand on your baby at all times. If you've forgotten something or need to answer the phone or door during the bath, you must take the baby with you.
 - **Start practicing infant water safety** (</English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Infant-Water-Safety.aspx>) **now:** Never leave a baby alone in the bath, even for an instant. Most child drownings inside the home occur in bathtubs, and more than half of bathtub deaths involve children under 1 year of age.
- **Check the water temperature.** Fill the basin with 2 inches of water that feels warm—not hot—to the inside of your wrist or elbow. If you're filling the basin from the tap, turn the cold water on first (and off last) to avoid scalding yourself or your child. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that the hottest temperature at the faucet should be no more than 120 degrees Fahrenheit to help avoid burns. In many cases you can adjust your water heater setting (<https://www.cpsc.gov/s3fs-public/5098.pdf>) to not go above this temperature. Tap water that's too hot can quickly cause burns serious enough to require a hospital visit or even surgery. In fact, hot water scalds (</English/health-issues/injuries-emergencies/Pages/Treating-and-Preventing-Burns.aspx>) are the top cause of burns among babies and young children.
- **Keep baby warm.** Once you've undressed your baby, place her in the water immediately so she doesn't get chilled. Use one of your hands to support her head and the other to guide her in, feet first. Talk to her encouragingly, and gently lower the rest of her body until she's in the tub. Most of her body and face should be well above the water level for safety, so you'll need to pour warm water over her body frequently to keep her warm.
- **Use soap sparingly.** Soaps can dry out your baby's skin. If a cleanser is needed for heavily soiled areas, use only mild, neutral-pH soaps without additives. Rinse soap from the skin right away. Wash baby's hair two or three times a week using a mild shampoo or body wash.
 - **You may see some scaly patches on your baby's scalp called cradle cap** (</English/ages-stages/baby/bathing-skin-care/Pages/Cradle-Cap.aspx>)—a harmless condition that appears in many babies. You can loosen the scales with a soft-bristled brush while shampooing in the bathtub, but it's also okay to leave it alone if it doesn't bother you. It's unlikely to bother your baby, and she will outgrow it.
- **Clean gently.** Use a soft cloth to wash your baby's face and hair, being careful not to scrub or tug the skin. Massage her entire scalp gently, including the area over her fontanelles (soft spots). When you rinse shampoo from her head, cup your hand across her forehead so the suds run toward the sides, not into her eyes. If some suds do get into her eyes, use the wet washcloth to wipe them with plain, lukewarm water. Wash the rest of her body from the top down.
- **Have fun in the tub.** If your baby enjoys her bath, give her some extra time to splash and play in the water. The more fun your child has in the bath, the less she'll be afraid of the water. Bathing should be a very relaxing and soothing experience, so don't rush unless she's unhappy.
 - **Young infants don't really need bath toys**, since just being in the water is usually exciting enough. Once a baby is old enough for the bathtub, however, toys become key. Containers, floating toys, even waterproof books make wonderful distractions as you cleanse your baby.
- **Get out and dry off.** When bath time is finished, promptly wrap a towel around your baby's head and body to help her stay warm while she is still wet. Bathing a baby of any age is wet work, so you may want to wear a terry-loth apron or hang a towel over your shoulder to keep yourself dry. Gently pat baby dry and apply a small amount of fragrance-free, hypoallergenic moisturizing lotion right after a bath to help prevent dry skin or eczema (</English/health-issues/conditions/skin/Pages/Eczema.aspx>).

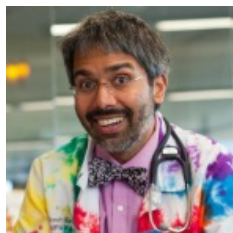
Remember...

Knowing the basics can make bathing your infant a breeze. Just make sure your baby stays comfortable and safe during bath time—and don't forget to soak up all the special moments that come with it!

Additional Information:

- [Infant Water Safety: Protect Your New Baby from Drowning \(/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Infant-Water-Safety.aspx\)](/English/safety-prevention/at-play/Pages/Infant-Water-Safety.aspx)
- [5 Bathroom Safety Tips for Infants & Young Children \(/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Bathroom-Safety.aspx\)](/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Bathroom-Safety.aspx)
- [Baby Birthmarks & Rashes \(/English/ages-stages/baby/bathing-skin-care/Pages/Your-Newborns-Skin-Birthmarks-and-Rashes.aspx\)](/English/ages-stages/baby/bathing-skin-care/Pages/Your-Newborns-Skin-Birthmarks-and-Rashes.aspx)

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