

A Guide for First-Time Parents

Life has changed now that your baby is here, and you might have lots of questions about what to do. These tips can help first-time parents feel confident about caring for a newborn in no time.

How Do I Get Help After My Baby Comes Home?

An important part of caring for a newborn is to also take care of yourself. Consider getting help during this time, which can feel hectic and a bit overwhelming.

Relatives and friends might want to help. Even if you disagree on some things, their own experiences might be helpful.

To keep your baby healthy, anyone handling your little one should be up to date on their vaccines and help only if they feel well. But if you don't feel up to having guests or have other concerns, don't feel guilty about limiting visitors.

How Do I Handle My Baby?

If you haven't spent a lot of time around newborns, they may seem very fragile. Here are a few basics to remember:

- Wash your hands (or use a hand sanitizer) before handling your baby. Newborns don't have a strong immune system yet, so they're at risk for infections. Make sure that everyone who handles your baby has clean hands.
- Support your baby's head and neck. Cradle the head when carrying your baby. And support the head when carrying the baby upright or when you lay your baby down.
- **Never shake your baby**, whether in play or in frustration. Shaking can cause bleeding in the brain and sometimes death. If you need to wake your baby, don't do it by shaking. Instead, tickle your baby's feet or blow gently on a cheek.
- Always fasten your baby securely when using a carrier, stroller, or car seat. Limit any activity that could be too rough or bouncy.
- Avoid rough play with newborns, such as jiggling them on the knee or throwing them in the air.

How Can I Bond With My Baby?

Bonding happens during the first hours and days after birth when parents make a deep connection with their child. Physical closeness can help form an emotional link and help your baby develop in other ways. Another way to think of bonding is "falling in love" with your baby. Kids thrive from having a parent or other adult in their life who loves them unconditionally.

Begin bonding by cradling and gently stroking your baby in different patterns. Another good technique is skin-to-skin contact (also called kangaroo care), where you hold your newborn against your own chest. This helps calm and soothe babies and regulate their heartbeat. It's a good practice for moms or dads to do.

Here's how to do skin-to-skin contact with your baby:

- Avoid using scented perfumes or lotions and stay away from cigarette smoke beforehand.
- Find a comfortable seat in a dimly-lit room. Wear a shirt that opens in the front. Lay your baby in just a diaper on your bare chest.
- Sit quietly, talk softly, hum, sing, or read aloud. Your baby may sleep during this time.

How Can Soothe My Baby?

Helping babies relax can help them feel happier and more comfortable. Here are some tips on soothing your baby.

Massage: Infant massage may help babies, especially those who were born early or have medical problems. Some types of massage may enhance bonding and help babies grow and develop. Many books and videos cover infant massage — ask your doctor for recommendations. Be careful, though — babies aren't as strong as adults, so massage your baby gently.

Sounds: Babies usually love vocal sounds, such as talking, babbling, singing, and cooing. Your baby will probably enjoy listening to soft music. Baby rattles and musical mobiles are other good ways to stimulate your infant's hearing. If your little one is fussy, try singing, reciting poetry and nursery rhymes, or reading aloud as you sway or rock your baby gently in a chair.

Some babies can be unusually sensitive to touch, light, or sound. They might startle and cry easily, sleep less than expected, or turn their faces away when someone speaks or sings to them. If that's the case with your baby, keep noise and light levels low to medium.

Swaddling: Another soothing technique is swaddling, which works well for some babies during their first few weeks. Proper swaddling keeps a baby's arms close to the body while allowing their legs to move a bit. It keeps a baby warm, and it seems to give most newborns a sense of security and comfort. Swaddling also may help limit the startle reflex, which can wake a baby.