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Crying in infancy

Infants have a cry reflex that is a normal response to stimuli, such as pain or hunger. Premature infants may not have a cry reflex. Therefore, they must be monitored closely for signs of hunger and pain.

Information

A cry is the infant's first verbal communication. It is a message of urgency or distress. The sound is nature's way of ensuring that adults attend to the baby as quickly as possible. It is very hard for most people to listen to a crying baby.

Almost everyone recognizes that infants cry for many reasons and that crying is a normal response. However, parents may feel a high amount of stress and anxiety when a baby cries frequently. The sound is perceived as an alarm. Parents are often frustrated at not being able to determine the cause of the crying and soothe the baby. First time parents often question their parenting abilities if a baby cannot be comforted.

WHY INFANTS CRY

At times, infants cry for no apparent reason. However, most crying is in response to something. It may be hard to figure out what is bothering the infant at the time. Some possible reasons include:

- Hunger. Newborns want to eat day and night, often every 2 to 3 hours.
- Pain caused by gas or intestinal spasms after feedings. The pain develops if the baby has been fed too much or not burped enough. Foods that a breastfeeding mother eats may cause gas or pain in her child.
- Colic. Many infants age 3 weeks to 3 months develop a crying pattern associated with colic. Colic is a normal part of development that may be triggered by many factors. It usually occurs in the late afternoon or evening hours.
- Discomfort, such as from a wet diaper.
- Feeling too hot or too cold. Babies may also cry from feeling too wrapped up in their blanket, or from wanting to be bundled up tightly.
- Too much noise, light, or activity. These can slowly or suddenly overwhelm your baby.

Crying is probably part of the normal development of the central nervous system. Many parents say they can hear a difference in tone between a cry for feeding and a cry caused by pain.

WHAT TO DO WHEN A BABY IS CRYING

When you are not sure why your baby is crying, first try to eliminate the sources that you can take care of:

- Make sure the baby is breathing easily and the fingers, toes, and lips are pink and warm.
- Check for swelling, redness, wetness, rashes, cold fingers and toes, twisted arms or legs, folded earlobes, or pinched fingers or toes.
- Make sure the baby is not hungry. Do not delay for long when your baby shows signs of hunger.
- Make sure you are feeding the child the proper amount and burping the baby correctly.
- Check to see that your baby is not too cold or too hot.
- Check to see whether the baby's diaper needs to be changed.
- Make sure there is not too much noise, light, or wind, or not enough stimulation and interaction.

Here are a few ways to soothe a crying baby:

- Try playing soft, gentle music for comfort.
- Talk to your baby. The sound of your voice may be reassuring. Your baby may also be calmed by the hum or sound of a fan or clothes dryer.
- Change the infant's position.
- Hold your baby close to your chest. Sometimes, infants need to experience familiar sensations, such as the sound of your voice in your chest, your heartbeat, the feel of your skin, the smell of your breath, the movement of your body, and the comfort of your hug. In the past, babies were held constantly and the absence of a parent meant danger from predators or abandonment. You cannot spoil a baby by holding them during infancy.

If the crying continues for longer than usual and you cannot calm the baby, contact a health care provider for advice.

Try to get enough rest. Tired parents are less able to care for their baby.

Use the resources of family, friends, or outside caregivers to allow yourself time to recover your energy. This will also be helpful for your baby. It does not mean that you are a bad parent or are abandoning your child. As long as caregivers are taking safety precautions and comforting the baby when necessary, you may be sure that your child is well cared for during your break.

Contact your provider immediately if your baby's crying occurs with symptoms such as fever, diarrhea, vomiting, rash, breathing difficulty, or other signs of illness.

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