

Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support – Your new baby’s sleep explained

Information for parents

Congratulations on the birth of your child!

The sleeping patterns of new babies often surprise new parents. Well-meaning comments from other people about how babies “should” sleep can be confusing. You might be wondering whether your baby’s sleep is normal and whether you are doing enough – or too much! – to help your baby sleep. It can be difficult to know what is based on scientific research or is just someone’s opinion.

We have put together some evidence-based information about normal newborn sleep, why it is so different from yours, and finally, some tips to help you get more sleep during this intense stage of your baby’s life.

How much sleep do babies need?

- ❖ Studies have shown that the total hours of sleep in a 24-hour period for a baby can range from 8-18 hours **(1)**. Just like adults, some babies need more sleep and some need less.
- ❖ Babies don’t sleep for long, uninterrupted periods like adults do. The time babies spend asleep can vary from 15 minutes to 3 hours at a time, and changes from day to day and night to night. Babies can be awake for as little as 45 minutes or up to 2 hours before they need to sleep again **(2)**. This randomness, though normal for babies, can be challenging for parents. Understanding why babies sleep like they do can be reassuring – and even help parents get more sleep!

Why is your baby’s sleep so different from yours?

There are five main reasons why a baby has a very different sleep pattern to an adult.

1. GROWTH

Babies grow quickly. Once they have regained their birth weight (usually by 10-14 days) they gain around 25-40g per day in the first 4 months of life, doubling their birth weight by 5-6 months and tripling it by a year **(3)**. A newborn baby’s brain is about one third the size of an adult brain. By 3 months it is half the size of an adult brain. To fuel all this growth, your baby needs to feed frequently, including waking at night to feed.



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2. FEEDING

Human milk is relatively low in protein and fat, like the rest of other “carry mammals” who keep their babies close and feed them often. “Cache” and “nest” mammals, such as deer and cats, have higher-protein, higher-fat milk because they leave their babies alone for longer periods.



Parents often feel (or may be told) that they should put their babies down between feeds, like cache or nest mammals do. This can lead to conflict between what you think you should do, and your baby's strong need to be close to you and to feed frequently. Their individual feeding pattern depends on many factors, including how efficiently they are feeding, how quickly they are growing, and the storage capacity of your breasts. Comparing your baby's feeding pattern with other babies' is rarely helpful. If your baby is growing normally and seems happy, their feeding pattern is working well, however much they are waking at night to feed.



3. BABY SLEEP CYCLES

A baby's sleep cycle is about 30-50 minutes long, compared with 90-120 minutes for an adult. Adults spend about 20% of sleep in "light active sleep" (also called REM, or "rapid eye movement" sleep). A baby spends 50% of their sleep time in REM sleep. Most babies will wake easily if put down during REM sleep. If your baby wakes up after 30-40 minutes, that is a whole sleep cycle and probably enough sleep for them at the time **(4)**.



4. SLEEP HORMONES

Babies do not produce the sleep hormone melatonin until 2-3 months of age **(5)**. This hormone is secreted in the evening when it starts to get dark. Once a baby starts to produce melatonin, they start to become capable of sleeping for longer (but may still wake at night).



5. FEELING SAFE

Babies are completely dependent on adults to meet their needs. They are happiest and usually sleep better when close to an adult they know well. Parents sometimes worry that if they keep their baby close they are "spoiling" them and the baby will never learn to sleep on their own. Just as your baby will crawl, walk and talk when they are ready, they will also fall asleep on their own and manage all night without help. Rushing any of these stages is a recipe for stress and frustration!



Most young babies sleep best close to an adult, and for safety reasons your baby should sleep in the same room as you for at least the first 6 months. You don't need to worry that by keeping your baby close at night now they will never sleep on their own. If your sleeping arrangement is no longer working for you, you can change it.

SAFETY NOTE

If you ever bring your baby into bed for sleep or feeding, it is important to know how to bed-share safely, even if you plan to stay awake. There are some situations in which bedsharing is unsafe, e.g. when the mother smokes or is under the influence of sedating medication or alcohol, or the baby is premature or unwell. It is never safe to sleep with a baby on a sofa.

You can find more information about safe sleep in the 'Useful Resources' section below.

Ways to optimize your baby's sleep

1. Feed your baby responsively.

Breastfeeding is calming for babies and they love to feel close to you. Offer the breast as soon as they show signs that they might be interested in feeding, or to calm and soothe them. As well as giving them milk and company, it can also warm them when they are cold, provide pain relief, help them get to sleep and much more.

A healthy, full-term baby who is growing normally can be trusted to show you how often and how long they want to feed, and when they want to change breasts. They can also show you when they don't want to feed! If they get upset when you offer the breast, try again later. As babies get older, they spend less total time feeding. You don't need to "space out" feeds - babies will do this by themselves when they are ready. There is no benefit to making a baby wait to feed. If your breasts are uncomfortable, or you just feel like feeding your baby, it is also fine to offer the breast even when they are not asking!

2. Learn to recognise their tired signs.

As you get to know your baby you will get better at spotting their individual signs that they are ready to sleep, e.g. yawning, rubbing their eyes or ears, turning away and going quiet or pale. Babies often need adult help to fall asleep, for example either by feeding, walking or rocking. By responding to their tired signs quickly, you will prevent your baby from becoming overtired. A baby who is overtired can find it harder to fall asleep.

3. Show your baby the daylight.

Exposure to natural light, especially in the morning, helps regulate the circadian rhythm and aids sleep **(6)**. Getting outside every day for fresh air and exercise is also a good way for you to look after yourself.

4. Start a bedtime routine.

Newborn babies typically settle for the night between 10pm and 2am. A predictable bedtime routine can help with sleep **(7)**. It could include things like a bath or wash, changing into nightclothes, singing, chatting about your day, reading stories, and so on. It doesn't really matter what you do as long as it's relaxing and you do roughly the same each time. At this stage it won't make much difference to your nights, but as your baby gets older they will start to associate the bedtime routine with the expectation of sleep. You might find it soothing too!

5. Burn off some energy.

From the age of 6 weeks give your baby some floor time. This will help them to develop their motor skills. Physical exercise has a positive effect on nighttime sleep **(8)**.

Attend to your own needs too

- ❖ Sleep disturbance is a normal part of parenting but it is tough, especially if you don't have much family support. Looking after yourself will help you to keep meeting your baby's intense needs.
 - Enlist the help of your partner, family or friends to do chores and make meals.
 - Go to bed when your baby does at night.
 - Lie down with or close to your baby when they sleep during the day.
 - If you feel comfortable being away from your baby between feeds, they will be fine with another trusted adult while you nap, have a lie-in, or do something else that makes you feel good.

If you find that you can't fall asleep, even when you are very tired and your baby is asleep, talk to someone. This can be a sign of low mood or anxiety. Your health visiting team or GP can help.

References

- 1) Galland, B.C., Taylor, B.J., Elder, D.E. and Herbison, P., 2012. Normal sleep patterns in infants and children: A systematic review of observational studies. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 16(3), pp.213-222.
- 2) Hookway L. 2019. *Holistic Sleep Coaching. Gentle Alternatives to Sleep Training for Health and Childcare Professionals*. Amarillo, Texas: Praeclarus Press
- 3) Murray, D. 2020. Average baby weight and length in the first year. Available at: <https://www.verywellfamily.com/first-year-infant-growth-431721>
- 4) Hookway L. 2019. *Holistic Sleep Coaching. Gentle Alternatives to Sleep Training for Health and Childcare Professionals*. Amarillo, Texas: Praeclarus Press
- 5) Rivkees, S.A., 2003. Developing circadian rhythmicity in infants. *Pediatrics*, 112(2), pp.373-381
- 6) Ibid.
- 7) Mindell, J.A., Telofski, L.S., Wiegand, B. and Kurtz, E.S., 2009. A nightly bedtime routine: impact on sleep in young children and maternal mood. *Sleep*, 32(5), pp.599-606.
- 8) Allen, S.L., Howlett, M.D., Coulombe, J.A. and Corkum, P.V., 2016. ABCs of SLEEPING: A review of the evidence behind pediatric sleep practice recommendations. *Sleep Medicine Reviews*, 29, pp.1-14.

USEFUL RESOURCES

Recommended books

[Let's talk about your new family's sleep](#), by Lyndsey Hookway (2020)

[The Positive Breastfeeding Book: Everything you need to feed your baby with confidence](#), by Amy Brown (2018)

[Safe Infant Sleep: Expert answers to your cosleeping questions](#), by James McKenna (2020)

[Sweet Sleep: Nighttime and naptime strategies for the breastfeeding family](#), La Leche League (2014)

[The Gentle Sleep Book: Gentle, no-tears, sleep solutions for parents of newborns to five-year-olds](#), by Sarah Ockwell-Smith (2015).

Recommended websites

<https://www.basisonline.org.uk/>

<https://www.parentingscience.com/newborn-sleep.html>

<https://kellymom.com/parenting/nighttime/sleep/>

<https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/sleep-and-night-time-resources/caring-for-your-baby-at-night/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/baby/caring-for-a-newborn/helping-your-baby-to-sleep/>

<https://www.laleche.org.uk/sleep-breastfed-baby/>