

Is a crying baby normal?

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All babies cry. It's the way they communicate; get our attention; tell us that something is wrong; that they are: wet, dirty, empty, full or in pain. Sometimes our babies' crying confuses us and makes us feel like we are the problem, that we are doing something wrong. Before we have our first babies, we imagine how we will parent them. We plan strategies based on our knowledge, our reading and observations of our friends' children. Smugly, we say to ourselves that we won't fall into this trap or that trap. We will have strict rules and our children will not interfere with our lives.

Then, when our first babies arrive, everyone else thinks that they can give us advice. We are showered with ideas on what to do and what not to do. If we don't do what our friends and relatives expect us to do, we become guilt ridden and think we are bad parents.

Sometimes we are vulnerable after difficult and tiring births or despondent after our birth plans did not go to plan. Our babies or we can be suffering the effects of analgesics given to us during the birth. If we are older mothers, we often have huge expectations of how we will be in control of yet another aspect of our lives. We expect the baby to fit in, prepare too well for the 'dream baby' and find that the reality does not fit the dream picture that we cherished.

At a recent LLL meeting, a grandmother said, "When we had our babies, we were younger than today's mothers and just got on with the job. We didn't have to analyse everything."

It comes as a shock to many new mothers to discover that normal babies do not just feed and sleep. From as early as the second day, some babies want a social time. These babies want to look around and learn, want some time on the floor, want some time being held and rocked.

A very sensible new mother told me that when she is tired of holding her baby, she just remembers what a wise friend told her. "If you think that you have been holding your baby half the day, remember that 50 percent of the day is just half of what the baby has been used to in the womb."

Remember, too, that all babies cry. A normal pattern is to cry more and more each day from about two weeks and to peak at about six to eight weeks. Usually the crying is worse in the late afternoon and evening. Some babies and young children do not know how to find the 'off switch.' The 'off switch' for feelings of pain and discomfort does not log on until about eight months of age. Also the 'off switch' for stopping a behaviour is not fully developed until about six years. Distraction does not always work for a young baby, so he keeps crying even after the reason for the crying has stopped.

Researchers are often surprised to find that infants whose crying is regarded as way off the scale are perceived as normal by their parents yet some babies whose crying is regarded as mild have parents who are very distressed.

So why does a baby cry?

In these days of instant answers for everything the most common reason is seen to be medical. These days, almost every second baby 'has' silent reflux or colic. "It's worth remembering that a distressed infant who seems to be in pain and who doesn't respond to anything that his parent tries is not new." P131. Kids Food Health, Book 1

Peine in the belly is a common disease of chylidren... The chylde cannot rest but cryeth and fretteh itself...Moreover the noyse and rumbling in the guttes, hither and thider, declareth the childe to be grieved with wynde in the belly and colyk.

Thomas Phaire's Boke of children, 1545.

Shakespeare himself,, described the first age of man as "an infant, mewling and puking in his nurse's arms."

Because almost all infants reflux at some point, it can be hard to determine if it is a reflux that requires medical attention that is causing a problem. One of the reassuring things is that in infants under four months, refluxed stomach acid rarely burns the lining of the gullet.

About half of all babies aged two months have significant regurgitation. This can increase until about three months of age and between six and 12 months most babies have outgrown it. Regurgitation may be a means of protecting a baby from being overfed. If your baby's tummy gets too full, s/he is likely to bring up the excess.

Sleeping babies have periods of calm, quiet sleep, but also frequent periods of squirming and grimacing sleep. Often during this time the baby will pass wind. Because babies are often asleep we see this behaviour and interpret it as a sign that our babies are unsettled, windy or colicky. As adults, we too, often pass wind, mutter and swallow when we change sleep states. We don't notice ourselves or our partners doing this unless we have something on our minds that causes us to stay awake longer than usual. Babies wake up more frequently because they spend more time in light sleep than we do.

Learn to recognise if your baby is overtired, but do not use that as the only excuse for crying. Some babies do get tired of being held and prefer to go to sleep out of their mothers' arms with just a gentle rocking, patting or lullaby to calm them. Realising that most babies have a cranky/fussy time of day is also reassuring for new mothers. My mother told me to cherish this as a social time of day rather than a fussy time of day. Trying to look at it this way helped this time of day feel less intense.

Knowing if your baby's crying or windy behaviour is in the normal range is the tricky part. Talk to other mothers and consult your health professional if you are not sure.

If you have a baby whose crying is due to colic or reflux you may find the suggestions in the LLL leaflets *Breastfeeding Your Baby with Reflux* and *When Babies Cry* useful. The ABA leaflet *Too Much*, available from LLL may also be helpful. Some mothers do find that their babies' symptoms are lessened when they exclude certain allergenic foods from their diets, if they take steps to control an overabundant milk supply or over active letdown and if they raise the head of the cot or make sure their babies have shorter more frequent feeds.

However, whether your baby falls into the normal range of crying or is suffering from colic, reflux or more, the essential thing is calm gentle handling. Ignore the myth that crying is good for the lungs. The comfort offered by your arms is never wasted. You can't spoil a baby; his wants are his needs.

References:

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