

Colic in babies: Causes, symptoms and treatment

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Most new parents have experienced the agony of colic: hours of

inconsolable crying from their newborn, leaving them at wit's end.

It's more common than some might think: The [American Pregnancy Association](#) estimates that 20% to 25% of babies have colic. And parents of a colicky baby will tell you that it is very stressful for both them and their babies. Here is a breakdown on what colic in babies is, when it usually starts, what causes it, and how to help soothe a colicky baby.

What is colic?

Parents want what is best for their babies and often envision blissful periods of snuggling, giggles and overall joy. But when your baby is colicky, it can push those feelings of joy aside, making parents worry that their baby is ill or something more serious is wrong. And even though colic in babies is normal, it can't subside fast enough for most parents.

The Mayo Clinic defines colic as [frequent, prolonged, and intense crying or fussiness in a healthy infant](#). More specifically, many physicians will diagnose your child with colic if they cry for more than three hours a day at least three days per week, for more than three weeks, typically starting when the baby is just a few weeks old.

Colic symptoms include the following:

- Intense crying that makes it appear your baby is screaming or in pain
- Crying for no apparent reason where changing a diaper or a feeding do not provide comfort
- Fussiness, even after the crying has come to an end
- Predictability, with most fussiness occurring in the evening
- Baby's face turns a bright red color
- Body tension, including stiffened arms and legs, clenched fists, a

tense abdomen and an arched back

Many babies present with more than one of the above symptoms, making the episode much more frustrating.

What causes colic in babies?

While the exact cause of colic is not fully understood, it is believed to be related to a combination of factors, including gastrointestinal discomfort, immature digestive systems and overstimulation.

And, thankfully, many of the issues believed to cause colic in babies can be treated by their pediatrician, according to the Mayo Clinic:

- Gas or indigestion
- An insufficiently developed digestive system
- Overfeeding or underfeeding
- Sensitivity to breast milk or formula
- Fear, frustration or excitement
- Overstimulation
- Early childhood headaches or migraines

However, because babies cannot yet communicate what is bothering them, the situation often gets worse before it gets better.

When does colic start?

All babies are different, but experts at [Children's Hospital of Philadelphia](#) (CHOP) say that most babies start showing signs of colic around three or four weeks of age.

Of course, the next question is how long does colic last? This, too, can

be a bit of a mystery, but in most cases, excessive fussiness will start to subside.

"The good news about colic is that it typically lasts until the baby is about 3 months old, then magically disappears," according to Dr. Catherine Bonita, a pediatrician with expertise in newborn care and nutrition at CHOP.

That said, a baby who cries multiple times a week for numerous hours a day for three months can challenge parents. For this reason, it's vital that parents know how to soothe a colicky baby and practice self-care to manage their stress.

How to soothe a colicky baby

One of the most frustrating things that parents of kids of any age will tell you is that what works for an issue one day might not work the next. The best approach is for parents to exude calm and patiently try new techniques to comfort their baby. The same holds for parents testing out baby colic treatments.

Some of the best strategies to soothe an unhappy baby include the following:

- Hold and cuddle your baby. Some babies just want that extra sense of security from a firm yet comfortable snuggle. Know that babies can't be cuddled too much at this young age.
- Walk with your baby. Sometimes a change of scenery can be enough to redirect the attention of even the youngest infant. Walking from room to room can create new surroundings that might capture your baby's interest.
- Swaddle your baby in a soft blanket. Swaddling is generally considered safe until your baby shows signs that they are ready to

roll over. If you follow the [back-to-sleep](#) recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, swaddling can help your baby feel more in control of their limbs.

- Sing and talk to your baby. Babies love the sound of their parents' voices, and it can provide comfort. So even if your baby is wailing and it feels like there is no end to their incessant crying, don't hesitate to [talk, read, sing and coo](#), especially during those early months.
- Let your baby suck on a pacifier. Though this is a personal decision for [parents](#), some [babies](#) simply need the comfort that sucking can provide.

When to call the doctor about your baby's colic

Babies should see their pediatrician or doctor at least six times before their first birthday. [Well-baby visits](#) are typically scheduled at 1 month old, 2 months old, 4 months old, 6 months old, and 9 months old. These appointments are often the best time to inform the doctor if your child shows signs of colic.

It is typically recommended that you call the doctor if the baby is still inconsolable after 3 months of age. Further, the U.S. National Library Medicine lists some additional symptoms that if associated with excessive crying, are reason to contact your baby's pediatrician right away: [fever, forceful vomiting, diarrhea, bloody stools or other stomach problems](#).

If you are the parent of a colicky baby, know that you are not alone. Be sure to take time for yourself when your baby is napping or in the care of another responsible party. Meditate, journal or get outside for a quick walk. Managing your own mental health will help make those weeks of [colic](#) more bearable.

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