

Let's Talk About...

Colic

What is colic?

Colic occurs when a healthy baby cries more than three hours a day, for more than three days a week and for at least three weeks. This is a common condition (not a disease) and will eventually go away on its own.

What does colic look like?

A baby with colic begins crying and fussing starts at three to six weeks old. Colic usually ends when the baby is three to six months old. The baby will cry around the same time each day or night, often after meals. It starts suddenly and ends suddenly.

Your baby will show signs of gas discomfort and the tummy may look very full and be hard. Babies with colic may pull their knees up to their chests, clench their fists, flail their arms and legs, and arch their backs. Your baby will also be restless, irritable and fussy.

What causes colic?

There is no single reason why babies get colic. Colic may be from different causes in different babies.

Most often, colic is just part of the normal brain development in a baby who is extra-sensitive to stimulation from sights, sounds, and sensations of digesting food. Unfamiliar sights and sound may overload an infant. Babies who are easily overloaded often have more severe colic, fussiness, and difficulty sleeping.

Newborns have a young digestive system that has never had food in it. Their systems are learning how to work. Muscles that support digestion have not developed the proper rhythm to move food efficiently through the digestive tract. Babies may not have the normal bacteria in their intestines to help digestion. This may explain why almost all infants outgrow colic within the first six months.

Milk or soy protein intolerance to formula is an uncommon cause of colic. Breastfed babies could develop an intolerance to cow milk protein or another food in the mother's diet, but this is also an uncommon cause of colic.

Some colicky babies have gas. It is not clear if the gas causes the colic or the baby has gas from swallowing too much air when crying.

Some people think that colic is because of a baby's temperament. Some babies may just take longer to adjust to the world. Others think that the normal reflux and spit-up irritates some babies more than others. Infants whose mothers smoke are more likely to have colic.

Colicky behavior is not often caused by a medical problem or illness. In those cases, you would not call it colic.

How is colic treated?

Unfortunately, no medications have been shown to help a baby with colic or gas. But there are ways to make life easier for you and your colicky baby.

- Do not continue a feeding if your baby is not hungry. Instead, console your baby. Do not worry that you are "spoiling" your baby with attention.
- Walk with your baby or sit in a rocking chair. Try various positions.
- Offer a pacifier to your baby, but do not force them to accept it.
- Burp your baby more often during feedings.
- Place your baby tummy-down across your lap and rub their back.
- Put your baby in a swing or vibrating seat, but not during sleep. This may have a soothing effect.
- Take your baby for a ride in the car. The vibration and movement of the car is often calming.

- Play music. Some babies respond to sound as well as movement.
- Some babies need decreased stimulation and may do well swaddled in a thin blanket in a darkened room.
- Place your baby in the same room as a running clothes dryer, white noise machine or vacuum. Some infants find low constant noise soothing.
- Try changing your diet if you breastfeed your baby. Breastfeeding mothers might avoid dairy products or caffeine in their own diets.
- Talk to the pediatrician about protein hydrolysate formula for formula-fed babies. If the colic is caused by protein sensitivity, you would see a decrease in colic within a few days.

Caring for a colicky baby can be extremely frustrating. Be sure to take care of yourself. Do not blame yourself or your baby for the constant crying. Try to relax and remember that your baby will eventually outgrow this phase. For many babies, crying is a normal part of brain development. It is also normal for you to need a break.

Friends and relatives are often happy to watch your baby so you can have some time out of the house. If no one is available, put the baby down in the crib and take a break before trying to console them again.

If at any time you feel you might hurt yourself or your baby, put the baby down in the crib and call for help immediately. Tell everyone who takes care of your child to never shake the baby, no matter how impatient or angry they might be.

When should I call my baby's doctor?

Contact your doctor if your baby:

- Does not feed well or does not have a strong suck. Colicky babies have a healthy suck and a good appetite. They are otherwise healthy and grow well.
- Seems uncomfortable when held or is difficult to console. Colicky babies like to be cuddled and held.
- Vomits forcefully or is losing weight. Colicky babies may spit up, but repeated vomiting is not from colic.
- Has diarrhea or bloody stools (poop). Colicky babies have normal stools.

Call your baby's doctor right away if your baby:

- Has a temperature of 100.4° F (38° C) or more
- Is crying for more than two hours at a time
- Is not consolable
- Is not feeding well
- Has diarrhea
- Has forceful or green vomit
- Is less awake or alert than usual
- If you think your baby may be crying because of another illness

Who do I call if I have more questions?

Contact your baby's doctor if you have any other questions.

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