

How to Soothe a Crying Infant

All parents of young babies know the stress of a crying infant. Babies cry for many reasons, and sometimes for no reason at all. It is normal for infants to cry 1 to 4 hours a day. Babies tend to cry more in the early evening hours around dinner time, but can cry any time of the day. Infants cry most between 4 and 8 weeks of age, but thankfully, most babies improve by 3 to 4 months.

Finding the cause of your infant's crying can be difficult. Common causes include:

- hunger
- gas
- wet or dirty diapers
- too hot or too cold; overdressed or underdressed
- overstimulation and fatigue
- pain or discomfort
- illness

Here are some tips to address the above problems:

- 1) Try feeding the infant if it is nearing feeding time. Offer a pacifier if he/she refuses the feeding or is overly agitated; this may calm him/her down before feeding the child again.
- 2) Attempt to burp the infant – it sometimes helps to lay the infant on the right side for a minute, then slowly raise him/her to an upright position – this may allow the gas bubble to rise, and the infant to burp.
- 3) Change wet or dirty diapers.
- 4) Remove or add blankets if appropriate.
- 5) Try stroking the infant's head while speaking, singing or humming in a soothing, comforting tone.
- 6) Check to see what might be causing pain such as an open diaper pin or tight clothing. Sometimes, babies can get hair or lint wrapped around their fingers and toes. This may cause extreme pain, so be sure to check all fingers and toes.
- 7) Is the baby sick? Check the infant's temperature and monitor the infant's feeding and bowel movements. Call your pediatrician if the infant has a fever (100.4 °F or 38 °C and higher), if the baby is not feeding normally, is having watery diarrhea, or if the crying continues for hours.

What can you do if the infant continues to cry and illness is unlikely? First, understand that it is normal for infants to cry and for parents to feel frustrated. Your infant's crying is not your fault and is not a reflection of your parenting skills. Each baby responds differently to different soothing techniques. Parents go through a learning process to find what works for their infant.

Here are some techniques to try:

- Swaddle the infant snugly in a receiving blanket with the arms down at the side. This is a technique that is used successfully in almost all newborn nurseries. It may take your infant a minute or two to settle. While swaddled, hold the infant on the side and pat the back or bottom with a slow steady beat, or try gently swaying with the infant. These techniques may recreate the sounds and movements felt in the womb, and for some infants may be very soothing.

- Try rocking the baby in a rocking chair or swing,
- Take the baby for a walk outside or a ride in the car.
- Try caressing or gently massaging the infant, or carry the baby in a front carrier that allows close contact.
- Try a warm bath. Some parents find getting in the tub with the infant for skin to skin contact helps.
- Turn on some “white noise” such as a vacuum cleaner, clothes dryer, running water or fan (but do not allow the fan to blow directly on the infant).
- Try varying the position that you carry your infant. Some infants like to be held facing forward in a sitting position while leaning back against the parent’s chest. Others like the football hold or to be held over the parent’s shoulder. Many like to be held with one hand supporting the bottom, the other supporting the head and back while infant is in a sitting position facing the parent. Gently “bob” the infant up and down like a buoy, or sway slowly back and forth while talking or cooing in a calm tone.

If all attempts fail – understand that crying is one of the few ways infants release tension. The baby may just need to be left alone. It is OK to let the infant cry for 5 to 10 minutes while left alone in a quiet dark room. This allows mom and dad to take a break as well. Remember, you are not being a bad parent. Often the baby will fall asleep, or the infant may quiet when picked up after crying for a few minutes. Remember to always consider illness as a possible cause. Call your pediatrician if you are ever in doubt about a possible underlying problem.

A crying baby can seem overwhelming at times – especially to a parent who is already sleep deprived and still adjusting to the increased workload of a new infant. Do not feel bad if you need to take a break or call a friend or relative for assistance. Reach out for help if you are feeling isolated, angry or depressed. Resources are always available for your support. Call your pediatrician if you need additional information.