Sleep Concerns

Infants go through several sleep stages as they grow, and not all sleep is the same. The types of sleep infants experience include deep sleep and rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, which is a very active sleep with a lot of movement.

Sleep patterns can be different from infant to infant. But here, briefly, is a general idea of what to expect during each stage.

- Newborns average 17 hours of sleep every 24 hours. They sleep in brief periods that last about 45 minutes to two hours.
- Sleep becomes more predictable at 2–3 months. Infants this age begin to sleep more during the night than they do during the day.
- Around 4 months, infants usually sleep about eight hours at night. They may wake briefly during active sleep but are usually able to soothe themselves back to sleep.
- At 7–9 months, their physical and cognitive skills are better developed. Some anxiety might result, which can disrupt sleep and wake them. This is normal.
- At 12–18 months, they begin sleeping eight–10 hours at night and take one to two naps. They might wake more at night and drop a nap near the end of this period.

Sometimes infants have sleep problems. The reasons range from teething to new physical and cognitive skills that make it harder for infants to fall asleep or sleep soundly.

Tips for dealing with sleep problems

Here are some tips to help you better understand and handle sleep problems.

Common causes of sleep problems

- Some infants younger than 12 months can develop sleep problems when teething.
- Overstimulation can cause sleep problems. This can happen when a child is not getting enough sleep or is playing very actively just before bedtime.
- Sleep can be disrupted by a major change in a child’s life, such as a new brother or sister, a new caregiver, or a new pet.

Unexplained sleep problems

Be alert to sudden, unexplained disruptions in sleep. Check for signs of illness, such as a fever, diarrhea, or change in appetite. Call your pediatrician if you see such symptoms.

Guidelines for healthy sleep

Here are a few things you can do to promote healthy sleep patterns.

- Keep a consistent routine. This includes waking your baby around the same time each day, feeding on a regular schedule, and putting your infant to sleep at the same time each night.
Keep your infant’s room at a comfortable temperature: in warm weather, around 72 degrees; in cold weather, 68–72 degrees in the day and 60–65 degrees at night.

Set a bedtime routine early, and stick to it. For example, give your infant a warm bath, read a book, rock your infant, sing softly, or play soothing music.

A few other suggestions for newborns

- Make your baby’s sleeping area comfortable. For example, use a bassinet or stroller if the crib seems too large.
- Make sounds that lull a baby to sleep, such as music, a fan, or other soothing hum.
- Put your newborns in a private room. This helps you resist picking up your baby every time he or she makes a sound. Do that only if necessary.
- Avoid having your baby sleep in bed with you.
- Providing sufficient sleep time during the day will help your baby sleep at night.

Sleep strategies

If your child is not sick and you’ve tried the guidelines above and still need help with a sleep problem, try letting your infant cry it out or several conditioning methods.

Crying it out

- Don’t try this with newborns. Wait until your infant is at least 6 months old.
- With crying it out, you allow your infant to cry himself or herself to sleep.
- It might take a few days or a week to get results.
- Sensitive babies can be traumatized by this. In that case, stay with your infant until he or she falls asleep, and keep doing that until he or she is secure enough to fall asleep alone.

Conditioning methods

These methods allow babies to get used to falling asleep on their own at a leisurely pace:

- **Ferberizing** is a method named after children’s sleep expert Dr. Richard Ferber. Put your infant to bed while awake, comfort without picking up, say goodnight, and leave. When your infant cries, wait five minutes, then return and comfort. Continue doing this, but increase the time you respond by five minutes each episode. Infants usually learn to fall asleep by themselves in four to seven days.

- **Reinforcing sleep rhythms** is a strategy based on the belief that sleep problems are caused by an infant’s being overly tired. To prevent that, learn to anticipate your baby’s sleep rhythms, and put your baby to sleep before fussing starts. If your baby wakes at night, comfort without picking up, and let him or her fall back asleep on his or her own.

- **Replacing negative sleep associations** is a way to reorganize the pattern a baby follows to fall asleep. Feed your infant long before a nap or bedtime. When your baby appears sleepy—and after your bedtime routine—put your baby to bed. Don’t give your baby a pacifier. Your baby might not like this at first, but he or she will get used to it.

Handling specific sleep problems

The above methods help with general nighttime sleep problems. There are other methods for handling specific problems, such as when children mix up day and night, don’t sleep through the night at 3–6 months, wake up too early, or resist bedtime. For tips on dealing with such problems, see the guide **Handling Specific Sleep Problems**.

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