

Patient information from BMJ

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Colic in babies

When your baby has colic he or she cries a lot of the time. This can leave you feeling anxious and exhausted. But there are things you can try that might comfort your baby.

What is colic?

Babies who have colic are not sick but they cry a lot more than babies usually do. Colic usually starts when a baby is a few weeks old and stops at 4 or 5 months. No one knows what causes it, but it is less common in babies who are breastfed.

For some babies colic may be a sign of a food allergy, such as being sensitive to cows' milk. Other things that may trigger colic include:

- if the baby is being breastfed some types of food or drink eaten by the mother might set it off. Examples include chocolate, eggs, citrus fruits, caffeine (found in coffee, tea, cola, and energy drinks), and some seafood.
- exposure to cigarette smoke, both during pregnancy and after the baby is born. Colic is twice as common in babies of mothers who smoke.
- not being burped (winded) enough after feeding. This can lead to wind and painful cramps.

If you are worried about your baby you should see your doctor. He or she will check whether there is anything wrong that is causing your baby to cry. Always see your doctor if:

- your baby has a fever
- your baby is vomiting more forcefully than usual
- your baby has very runny or watery stool, or
- your baby's pattern of crying changes suddenly.

Your doctor may diagnose colic if your baby cries a lot but is otherwise generally well and gaining weight. Colic doesn't mean you are doing anything wrong as a parent. And colic won't harm your baby.

What are the symptoms?

Here are some signs that your baby might have colic.

- Your baby often starts crying suddenly. The cry is high pitched and nothing you do seems to help.
- The crying begins at the same time each day, often in the afternoon or evening.
- Your baby might draw his or her legs up when crying.
- Your baby might clench his or her hands.
- Your baby's face might flush.
- The crying can last for minutes or hours. A baby with colic cries for 3 hours a day or more.
- The crying often winds down when your baby is exhausted or when they have passed wind or poo.

Crying is not always a sign of colic. Other reasons that babies cry include having a wet diaper, being hungry, being too hot or cold, or being in pain.

What treatments work?

No single treatment for colic has been shown to work for all babies. You may want to try different things to see what works for you.

Things you can do yourself

Here are some things you can try to comfort your baby and help stop the crying:

- Hold your baby in an upright position to help any gas to pass.
- If you are breastfeeding, allow your baby to finish one breast before you offer the second. Try to avoid eating or drinking things that might upset your baby.
- If you are bottle feeding, make sure that the hole in the nipple is the right size for the way your baby feeds. Babies who suck hard and feed quickly need bigger holes, otherwise they swallow too much air. You can buy bottle nipples with bigger holes if your baby needs them.
- Hold, cuddle, and carry your baby as much as you like. Even if he or she doesn't seem to cry any less, it can help to comfort and reassure you both.

Treatments you can buy at a pharmacy or health food shop

Some parents use gripe water or simeticone drops. But we don't know whether they work. There is no evidence to show they are helpful.

Switching formulas

If your baby is bottle fed, talk to your doctor or health visitor about whether it is worth trying a different type of formula. Formula without certain sugars or proteins from cows' milk may help if your baby is sensitive to cows' milk.

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But if your baby is growing well on the brand of formula you use it may not be a good idea to switch. If you want to try switching, ask your health visitor which types of formula are suitable.

What will happen to my baby?

Your baby will probably grow out of colic by the time he or she is 4 or 5 months old. In the meantime try not to worry as long as your baby is eating well and gaining weight normally.

It's important to look after yourself. If you can, take a break by letting friends or family help look after your baby.

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