

Understanding Infant Sleep



A Guide for Parents and Caregivers



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Introduction

Sleep is essential for an infant's growth and development. A newborn's internal clock is not fully developed, which means their brains don't know the difference between day and night. They will sleep for short periods of time and will wake frequently for feeding. By 2 to 3 months, their bodies make melatonin, which is a hormone that helps them know the difference between day and night.

By six months, many infants begin sleeping longer at night and develop more predictable naps, though patterns vary based on factors like temperament and feeding habits.

Responding to your baby with care and attention is an important part of building a strong, secure bond. Spending quality time together, like talking, playing, and making eye contact, also helps strengthen connection with your baby.

Caregivers play a key role in fostering healthy sleep by recognizing sleep cues, maintaining a consistent bedtime routine, and ensuring a safe sleep environment. Understanding these changes helps set realistic expectations and supports both infant well-being and caregiver rest.





Guidelines for Infant Sleep

All babies are different and their sleep patterns vary as they grow. Your baby may have a little less or more sleep than the guidelines below. Speak to your healthcare provider if you are concerned about your baby's sleep.

Age of Infant:	Amount of Sleep:
Newborns	14 to 18 hours per day • Sleeps in short periods (30 minutes to 3-4 hours at a time) • Awake for no more than 2 hours at a time • May cry or be fussy for 3 to 6 hours, especially in the evening • Sleeps more during the day than at night
2-6 Months	14 to 16 hours per day • Takes 2 to 3 naps (each lasting 30 minutes to 3 hours) • After 3 months, nap patterns become more regular • Might still have an evening fussy period • Nighttime sleep starts to get longer
6-11 Months	11 to 14 hours per day • Takes 2 naps (each lasting 30 minutes to 2 hours) • More awake time during the day • Sleep cycles become more stable
12 Months	10 to 13 hours per day • Takes 1 to 2 naps (each lasting 30 minutes to 2 hours) • Might resist naps but still needs them for development • More awake time in the afternoon and evening

Recognizing Sleep Cues

Babies show signs of sleepiness before becoming overtired. Responding early makes it easier for them to fall asleep.

Signs of Sleep Readiness: 0-6 months

Early Sleep Cues: Rubbing eyes, yawning, fussing, glazed look, rapid blinking.

Late Sleep Cues: Crying, arching the back, increased irritability.

Signs of Sleep Readiness: 6-12 months

Early Sleep Cues: Rubbing eyes or head, tugging ears or pulling hair, yawning, sucking thumb or fingers, staring off or losing focus.

Late Sleep Cues: Crying, fussing.

When you notice your baby's cues and respond in a loving, consistent way (like soothing, feeding, or comforting them), your baby learns that they are safe and that you will be there when they need you. This helps them feel secure and supports their ability to calm themselves over time.

Remember:

It's okay to let your baby sleep during the day. Daytime sleep may help your baby sleep better at night as it prevents them from becoming overtired. Overtired babies often have more trouble settling to sleep.





Creating Healthy Sleep Routines

A consistent bedtime routine helps babies learn when it's time to sleep. You cannot force an infant to sleep, but they can be "set up" for sleep. Doing the same steps in your pre-sleep routine can help your baby sleep better.

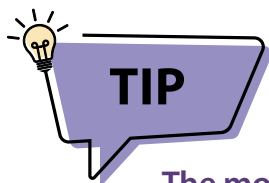
Pre-Sleep Routine for 0-6 Months (20-30 minutes)

- Give your baby a gentle massage to relax them.
- Change their diaper and put on sleepwear.
- Read a short story in a gentle voice.
- Sing a soft song to help them settle. Consider using white noise in moderation to help your baby fall asleep.
- Lay your baby in their sleep space and say, "Good night."



TIP

If your baby wakes or makes noise while sleeping, wait a few minutes before picking them up. They may settle back to sleep on their own.



The more consistent the routine, the better the baby's sleep will become.

Pre-Sleep Routine for 6-12 Months (20-30 Minutes)

- Bath or diaper change to signal bedtime.
- Read a short book to promote relaxation.
- Sing a lullaby to create a soothing atmosphere.
- Dim the lights to prepare for sleep.
- Lay baby down in their sleep space to establish independent sleep habits.





Safe Sleep Practices

Safe sleep practices help keep your baby safe and reduce the risk of sleep-related injuries or sudden, unexpected death. Most sleep risks happen when a baby's environment or position makes it harder for them to breathe, move freely, and stay at a safe body temperature.



You can lower these risks by using these strategies:

- Always place baby **on their back to sleep**. Once your baby can roll from their back to their stomach or side, you don't need to turn them back onto their back.
- For the first 6 months, keep your baby in the same room as you for sleep.
- Keep the sleep space clear of blankets, pillows, and toys. This allows airflow and helps to prevent suffocation.
- Use a firm, flat mattress (15 cm thick or less).
- If you are feeling tired or sleepy while caring for your baby, place your infant on their back in a safe sleep space. It is safer to put your baby down and rest yourself than to risk falling asleep while holding or feeding them.
- Do not use baby swings, bouncers, strollers, car seats and high chairs for sleep.
- If your baby falls asleep in a seat or swing, move them to their crib or bassinet as soon as you can. Sleeping in an upright, semi-upright or seated position can cause your baby's head to fall forward and make it hard to breathe.

- Keep your baby comfortable by dressing them in a sleep sack or light clothing. Avoid using thick blankets, and remove hats indoors. This will help prevent overheating during sleep.
- Avoid weighted sleepwear, as it can restrict movement and breathing.
- If you choose to swaddle your baby, leave one or both arms outside of the blanket, and do not wrap hips or legs tightly.
Stop swaddling when your baby shows signs of rolling over. Swaddling becomes unsafe if a baby rolls onto their stomach while wrapped, because they may not be able to move their head to breathe properly.
- Keep the room at a comfortable temperature of 20 to 22 degrees Celsius. Check your baby's temperature by gently feeling their chest or the back of their neck. These areas should feel warm, not hot or sweaty. Cooler hands and feet are normal.
- Well-baby check ups with your healthcare provider supports your baby's healthy growth and development.





Smoke Exposure

Avoid smoking or vaping near your baby.

Exposure to vapour, second- and third-hand smoke increases the risk of **sudden and unexpected sleep-related death** and breathing problems, such as asthma. Breathing problems can make it harder for babies and young children to breathe comfortably and sleep well

Keep your home and cars smoke-free.

After smoking or vaping, wash your face and hands to remove any residue from your skin and change your outer layer of clothing.



Sleep Strategies for Babies Over 6 Months

Some babies need extra support learning to fall asleep on their own. If gentler approaches (like rocking, feeding, or staying with your baby until fully asleep) are no longer working or are becoming difficult to maintain, you may consider using a structured sleep strategy.



When to Consider a Sleep Strategy

You may be ready if:

- Your baby is **6 months or older**
- Your baby is growing and developing well
- Current sleep routines are **no longer working**
- You are ready and able to **follow a consistent plan**
- Your baby has **regular routines** and you spend quality time together in the day
- There are **no illnesses, teething, or major changes** (e.g., moving, starting daycare, starting solids)





Camping Out

What it is:

- Camping out helps babies adjust to sleeping alone while knowing you are nearby. This approach offers reassurance through your presence.

Key Points

- Safe and effective when used consistently
- Helps baby practice self-soothing
- Some fussing or noise is normal



How to do Camping Out

- Stay in the room while your baby learns to fall asleep on their own, gradually moving farther away over time.
- Follow a routine: Put your baby in their sleep space when drowsy. Use a calming phrase like, "Night night, I love you."
- Give space: Sit near their crib but do not pick them up. Each night, move farther away.
- Stay quiet: Speak softly if needed. Avoid eye contact or stimulation.
- Check at night: If your baby wakes, return to your last position and repeat the steps.

Controlled Comforting

What it is:

- Controlled comforting teaches babies to self-soothe by having caregivers check on them at set times. This helps them learn you will come back while developing self-soothing skills.

Key Points

- Safe and effective when used consistently
- Different from “crying it out” because you **check in regularly**
- Supports both independence and reassurance



How to do Controlled Comforting

- Follow your baby’s usual bedtime routine.
- Lay baby down drowsy but awake. Say a comforting phrase, then leave the room.
- Wait before checking: Start with 2 minutes. Gradually increase the time before checking in, but do not wait longer than 15 minutes.
- Watch for changes: If your baby begins to settle, delay checking in to avoid disrupting them.
- Keep the check-ins brief: Speak softly, offer a gentle touch, but avoid picking them up.
- Stay consistent: Use the same wait times every night, even if they wake up overnight.

Important Reminders for Both Approaches

- These strategies take patience. Stick with one for at least two weeks before deciding if it works.
- Continue to respond to your baby during the day.
- Pause the sleep strategy if your baby becomes sick and start it again when they are better.
- Avoid the use of electronic devices and screentime during the process.
- Consistency is key. Progress takes time.
- It’s okay to reassess if a method isn’t working for your family. If sleep does not improve, talk to your healthcare provider.

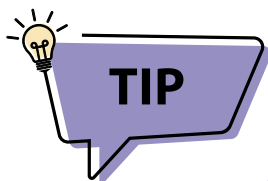




Caring for Yourself

When you're not getting enough sleep, it can be harder to respond to your baby in a calm and consistent way. Taking care of your own rest, mental health, and confidence helps you feel more patient and supported, which makes it easier to respond to your baby with care. This not only helps your baby feel safe and secure, but also strengthens your bond and supports their healthy development.

- Your sleep matters too! Try to rest when your baby naps.
- Make your personal sleep space calm and comfortable.
- Set realistic expectations. It is normal to sleep for short periods of time in the early weeks after baby is born.
- Let go of expectations to keep the house tidy all the time.
- Take short breaks, even if it is just for a couple of minutes.
- Get outside when you can. Fresh air and a change of scenery can help you feel better.
- Make time to do the things you enjoy.
- Stay hydrated.
- Eat regularly and choose healthy foods.
- Stay active, starting slowly and gently, and use relaxation techniques.
- Use your support system if you can (e.g., your partner, family, or friends can help).
- Try taking turns caring for the baby so everyone can get some rest.
- Talk to your health care provider about community programs and supports.



**Remember, it's okay
to ask for help.**



Additional Information

**Scan the QR code for more information
on Infant Sleep and Sleep Habits.**





HEALTH
DEPARTMENT

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Durham Health Connection Line
905-668-2020 or 1-800-841-2729.
Dial 311 (within regional limits)
durham.ca/parenting

If you require this information in an accessible
format, contact 1-800-841-2729.

