

Infant Colic: inconsolable crying in a healthy newborn baby and irritability. The condition has no known cause but is harmless, although it can be very distressing for parents or carers. It's very common, affecting up to two out of every 10 babies. Then, colic is uncontrollable crying in a baby. It's not known what causes colic.

Symptoms of colic

Colic usually affects babies in the first few weeks of their lives but generally goes after about three or four months. Crying can be intense and furious and it may last for several hours a day over a few weeks. Although crying can occur at any time, it usually gets worse in the late afternoon and evening, and can affect your baby's sleep.

Although colic isn't thought to be due to pain, your baby may look uncomfortable or appear to be in pain. Babies may arch their backs, draw up their legs to their tummy, become red in the face and pass wind.

Colic isn't a serious condition. Research shows that babies with colic continue to eat and gain weight, despite the crying.

The main problem with the condition is the stress and anxiety it creates at home, especially if it's your first child. You may find being unable to comfort your new baby stressful, as well as finding it difficult to cope with the constant crying, so it's important for you to have support and to take a break if things get on top of you.

Causes of colic

The cause of colic isn't known. Painful wind may contribute to colic, but there is little evidence to prove that it's linked to digestive problems.

Another theory is that while their digestive systems are maturing, some babies are intolerant to certain substances such as lactose (sugar found in milk) passed on through breastfeeding and formula milk. However, evidence to support this is limited.

Another possible cause may be your baby's temperament. This may make your baby highly sensitive to the environment, and he or she may react to stimulation or changes by crying.

Diagnosis of colic

You may be worried about your baby's crying and want to get advice from your doctor or health visitor to make sure there isn't a serious problem. You can think about what other things may be causing your baby to cry. These could include:

- winding - sit a bottle-fed baby upright when feeding to reduce his or her air intake (ask your health visitor for advice on how to do this properly)
- drinking milk too quickly in a bottle-fed baby - you may find it helpful to try different teat sizes
- hunger or thirst
- tiredness
- lack of contact - some babies want to be cuddled all the time
- temperature - your baby may be too hot or too cold
- itchiness - itchy clothes or labels, or eczema

Treatment of colic

There is no single medicine or proven cure for colic, but there are measures you can try that may help. Different babies are comforted in different ways, and you may need to try a few methods to see what works.

Self-help

You may find the following techniques helpful in trying to soothe your baby.

- Hold your baby and walk or dance around with him or her. Babies need lots of contact and like the movement.
- Carry your baby in a front sling or backpack.
- Try using a baby swing.
- Sing softly and talk to your baby.
- You may want to change your baby's position by propping him or her up, so he or she can look around more.
- Try to soothe your baby with continuous noise or vibrations from household appliances like the dishwasher, vacuum cleaner or washing machine.
- Take your baby for a car ride or a walk in the buggy.
- Give your baby a dummy to suck on.
- Bathe your baby - the warm water may be comforting.

Elimination diets

There are some dietary changes you may wish to try. These may help some babies but none are proven to treat colic.

If your baby has formula milk, your health visitor may suggest switching the brand you use. It's thought that some babies may not be able to digest lactose very well, but this improves as they get older. If you put breast milk into a bottle or use formula feed containing cows' milk, you may wish to try adding lactase to it before feeds. Lactase breaks down lactose in the body and can improve symptoms in some babies. You can buy lactase from a pharmacy - always read the patient information leaflet and if you have any questions, ask your pharmacist for advice.

There is limited evidence to suggest that a hypoallergenic diet (free of milk, eggs, wheat and nuts) or hypoallergenic formula if you're bottle-feeding, can ease symptoms of colic. If you're breastfeeding, you could try eliminating dairy products from your diet to see if this eases symptoms.

There is limited evidence that simeticone may improve symptoms of colic. This treatment is used to relieve trapped wind. You may also consider trying 'colic drops' or 'gripe water', which are available without a prescription. Try these remedies for one week to see if there is any improvement.

Complementary therapies

Aromatherapy and tummy massage using lavender oil may help relieve the symptoms of colic. Always ask the advice of a qualified practitioner as some herbal remedies and complementary therapies can be harmful to babies.

Help and support

Caring for a baby with colic can be very stressful, frustrating and challenging for any parent or carer, particularly if it's your first child. If you're feeling frustrated and upset because you can't comfort your baby, leave him or her somewhere safe, such as a cot, for a few minutes and go into another room to calm down. Taking a short break can stop you from getting more upset.

If you feel overwhelmed, ask a partner, family member or friend to take over for a while, even for just an hour or two, so you can have a proper break from your baby's crying.

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