

A Guide for First-Time Parents

Life has changed now that your baby is here, and you might have lots of questions about what to do. These tips can help first-time parents feel confident about caring for a newborn in no time.

How Do I Get Help After My Baby Comes Home?

An important part of caring for a newborn is to also take care of yourself. Consider getting help during this time, which can feel hectic and a bit overwhelming.

Relatives and friends might want to help. Even if you disagree on some things, their own experiences might be helpful.

To keep your baby healthy, anyone handling your little one should be up to date on their vaccines and help only if they feel well. But if you don't feel up to having guests or have other concerns, don't feel guilty about limiting visitors.

How Do I Handle My Baby?

If you haven't spent a lot of time around newborns, they may seem very fragile. Here are a few basics to remember:

- Wash your hands (or use a hand sanitizer) before handling your baby. Newborns don't have a strong immune system yet, so they're at risk for infections. Make sure that everyone who handles your baby has clean hands.
- Support your baby's head and neck. Cradle the head when carrying your baby. And support the head when carrying the baby upright or when you lay your baby down.
- **Never shake your baby**, whether in play or in frustration. Shaking can cause bleeding in the brain and sometimes death. If you need to wake your baby, don't do it by shaking. Instead, tickle your baby's feet or blow gently on a cheek.
- Always fasten your baby securely when using a carrier, stroller, or car seat. Limit any activity that could be too rough or bouncy.
- Avoid rough play with newborns, such as jiggling them on the knee or throwing them in the air.

How Can I Bond With My Baby?

Bonding happens during the first hours and days after birth when parents make a deep connection with their child. Physical closeness can help form an emotional link and help your baby develop in other ways. Another way to think of bonding is "falling in love" with your baby. Kids thrive from having a parent or other adult in their life who loves them unconditionally.

Begin bonding by cradling and gently stroking your baby in different patterns. Another good technique is skin-to-skin contact (also called kangaroo care), where you hold your newborn against your own chest. This helps calm and soothe babies and regulate their heartbeat. It's a good practice for moms or dads to do.

Here's how to do skin-to-skin contact with your baby:

- Avoid using scented perfumes or lotions and stay away from cigarette smoke beforehand.
- Find a comfortable seat in a dimly-lit room. Wear a shirt that opens in the front. Lay your baby in just a diaper on your bare chest.
- Sit quietly, talk softly, hum, sing, or read aloud. Your baby may sleep during this time.

How Can Soothe My Baby?

Helping babies relax can help them feel happier and more comfortable. Here are some tips on soothing your baby.

Massage: Infant massage may help babies, especially those who were born early or have medical problems. Some types of massage may enhance bonding and help babies grow and develop. Many books and videos cover infant massage — ask your doctor for recommendations. Be careful, though — babies aren't as strong as adults, so massage your baby gently.

Sounds: Babies usually love vocal sounds, such as talking, babbling, singing, and cooing. Your baby will probably enjoy listening to soft music. Baby rattles and musical mobiles are other good ways to stimulate your infant's hearing. If your little one is fussy, try singing, reciting poetry and nursery rhymes, or reading aloud as you sway or rock your baby gently in a chair.

Some babies can be unusually sensitive to touch, light, or sound. They might startle and cry easily, sleep less than expected, or turn their faces away when someone speaks or sings to them. If that's the case with your baby, keep noise and light levels low to medium.

Swaddling: Another soothing technique is swaddling, which works well for some babies during their first few weeks. Proper swaddling keeps a baby's arms close to the body while allowing their legs to move a bit. It keeps a baby warm, and it seems to give most newborns a sense of security and comfort. Swaddling also may help limit the startle reflex, which can wake a baby.

Here's how to swaddle your baby:

- Spread out a baby blanket with one corner folded over slightly.
- Lay the baby face-up on the blanket with their head above the folded corner.
- Wrap the left corner over the baby's body and tuck it beneath the back, going under the right arm.
- Bring the bottom corner up over the baby's feet and pull it toward their head, folding the fabric down if it gets close to your baby's face. Don't wrap too tightly around the hips. The hips and knees should be slightly bent and turned out. Wrapping your baby too tightly may increase their risk for hip dysplasia (dis-PLAY-zhuh).
- Wrap the right corner around your baby, and tuck it under their back on the left side, leaving only the neck and head exposed. To make sure your baby isn't wrapped too tightly, make sure you can slip a hand between the blanket and your baby's chest. This will allow comfortable breathing. But make sure that the blanket isn't so loose that it could come undone.
- **Stop swaddling when your baby shows signs of starting to roll over.** That's usually around 2 months. At this age, some babies can roll over while swaddled, which puts them at risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

How Do I Diaper My Baby?

Whether you use cloth or disposable diapers, your little one will dirty them about 10 times a day, which is about 70 times a week. When diapering your baby:

- Have all the supplies you need within reach.
- Wipe your baby front to back gently using water, cotton balls, and a washcloth or wipes.
- Apply diaper cream if needed to treat diaper rash.
- Wash your hands after changing the diaper.

When Should I Bathe My Baby?

For the first few weeks, babies get sponge baths. Then, after the umbilical cord stump falls off and the circumcision heals (if your baby was circumcised), babies can have baths in a sink or small plastic infant tub.

When your baby is ready for tub baths, the first ones should be gentle and brief. If your baby gets upset, go back to sponge baths for a week or two, then try the tub bath again. A bath two or three times a week in the first year is fine. More frequent bathing may be drying to the baby's skin.

How Do I Care for the Umbilical Cord and Circumcision Area?

- **Umbilical cord care:** Clean around the cord stump with plain water and blot dry until the stump dries up and falls off, usually in 10 days to 3 weeks. Don't let the belly button area soak in water until the stump falls off and the area heals. Before the cord stump falls off, it will change color from yellow to brown or black — this is normal. Call your doctor if the area looks red, has a bad odor, or has discharge.
- **Circumcision care:** After a circumcision, doctors usually put petroleum jelly on the tip of the baby's penis and cover it with gauze to keep the wound from sticking to the diaper. At each diaper change, gently wipe the tip clean with warm water (not a baby wipe), then apply petroleum jelly and gauze. Penis redness or irritation should heal within a few days to a week. But call your baby's doctor right away if it gets worse or if pus-filled blisters form. These can be signs of an infection.

How Often Should I Feed My Baby?

Whether feeding your newborn by breast or a bottle, you may wonder how often to do so. Generally, it's recommended that babies be fed on demand — that is, whenever they seem hungry. Your baby may show you they're hungry by crying, putting fingers in their mouth, or making sucking noises. A newborn baby needs to be fed every 2–3 hours.

Breastfed babies are probably getting enough to eat if they:

- seem satisfied
- have about 6 wet diapers and several poops a day
- sleep well
- gain weight regularly

Another good way to tell if a breastfed baby is getting milk is to notice if your breasts feel full before feeding your baby and less full after feeding. If you're formula-feeding, you can easily see if your baby is getting enough to eat. Talk with your doctor if you have concerns about your baby's growth or feeding schedule.

Babies often swallow air during feedings, which can make them fussy. To help prevent this, burp your baby often.

What Should I Know About My Baby's Sleep?

You may be surprised to learn that newborns sleep about 16 hours or more. They typically sleep for periods of 2–4 hours. Many babies sleep through the night (between 6–8 hours) at 3 months of age, but if yours doesn't, it's not a cause for concern. Like adults, babies develop their own sleep patterns and cycles.

Always place babies on their back to sleep to lower their risk of SIDS. Other safe sleeping practices include:

- not using blankets, quilts, sheepskins, bumpers, stuffed animals, or pillows in the crib or bassinet because they can suffocate a baby
- parents sharing a bedroom (but not a bed) with the baby for the first 6 months to 1 year

Change the position of your baby's head from night to night (first right, then left, and so on). This helps prevent a flat spot from developing on one side of the head.

Before long, you'll have a routine and be parenting like a pro. If you have questions or concerns, talk with your doctor. They can recommend resources that can help.

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