

Baby's First Weeks— Newborn Care

Healthy babies can usually go home from the hospital 2 days after birth. New parents have a lot of questions about caring for their newborn. This handout answers basic questions about caring for a newborn infant in the first few weeks. If you have questions about caring for your baby or any concerns about his or her health, call our office.

How do I care for a newborn baby?

That's the question asked by every new parent. Even when it's not their first baby, parents may need a "refresher course" when a new baby comes along.

The newborn period is a special time when your baby adjusts to life outside the womb. Newborns sleep a lot and have to eat frequently. They may cry frequently and need a lot of attention.

A newborn infant can place a lot of demands on the parents, especially a mother who's recovering from labor and delivery. This handout answers some "Frequently Asked Questions" for the parents of newborns.

What are the basics of newborn care?

Bringing baby home. You must take care of some important safety steps before taking your newborn home:

- *Car seat.* You must have an approved car seat to drive your baby home from the hospital. Infants under 1 year old must ride in a rear-facing car seat, properly installed in the back seat.
- *Home safety/childproofing.* Make sure your home has working smoke detectors (check batteries). Ask your doctor for advice on childproofing your home.
- *No smoking!* Avoid smoking around your baby and discourage others from smoking inside your home.

Feeding.

- *Breast versus bottle.* Breast milk is the recommended diet for your newborn. Mothers will receive breast-feeding instruction after delivery. If you choose not to breast-feed or there are medical reasons why you can't, infant formula is an acceptable alternative to breast-feeding.
- *Avoid giving your baby supplemental bottles,* at least until breast-feeding and milk production are well established. Breast-fed babies need additional vitamin D, found in

multivitamin supplements. Additional iron and fluoride may be recommended as well.

- *How often?* Healthy infants want to feed frequently during the first week—every 2 to 4 hours. Breast-fed infants may need to be fed more often than bottle-fed infants. Breast-feeding stimulates the breasts to make more milk. It's normal for the baby to lose a little weight during the first week. Your baby should be gaining weight by the end of the second week. In general, until your baby has gained enough weight, he or she should be breast-feeding at least eight times per 24 hours.

- *How much?* If you're breast-feeding, it can be difficult to tell how much milk your baby is getting. Generally, if your newborn is satisfied after nursing, sleeps between feedings, and gains weight, he or she is getting enough milk. After the first few days, diapers should be wet every 4 hours or so.

Sleeping.

- *How much? How often?* Generally, newborns sleep most of the day for the first few months.
 - They generally sleep for 1 to 4 hours at a time, followed by 1 to 2 hours of awake time. Most babies settle into a nightly sleep routine by 2 to 3 months.
 - Most babies do not sleep 5 to 6 hours through the night until they are at least 3 months old. Until that time, your baby will probably wake up at least once during the night to be fed (2 a.m. feeding).
- "Back to sleep."

- *Place babies on their backs to sleep!* This is the most important thing you can do to reduce your infant's risk of sudden infant death syndrome. 
- Your baby should sleep in a crib with a firm mattress. The mattress should be covered by a fitted sheet. Don't use a top sheet, pillows, or blankets. Dress your baby in sleepwear that is appropriate for the temperature.
- *Bathing.* Babies don't need to be bathed every day—once every few days is fine. Give only sponge baths for the first couple of weeks, until the umbilical cord stump falls off. (Your doctor will give you instructions on caring for the umbilical cord.)
 - When you start giving your baby tub baths, use a basin or special "baby tub" with no more than 2 inches of water. Use only mild soap, if any.
 - Support your baby's head during the bath.
 - *Never leave your baby alone in the bath, even for a few seconds!* 

- *Crying.* Some newborns cry a lot. Although crying sometimes means your baby needs feeding or a diaper change, at other times it's difficult to tell why he or she is crying. Hold and comfort your baby, gently rocking, singing, or talking to him or her. Call our office if you find it difficult to comfort your baby.
- *Illnesses.* If your baby seems sick or warm, take his or her temperature. The best way to take a newborn's temperature is to use a rectal thermometer. If the temperature is 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, call our office.
- *Urine and stools.* After the first few days, diapers should be wet every 3 to 4 hours or so. Your baby will probably pass the first dark green “meconium” stool within the first 48 hours after birth, usually in the hospital. After that, your baby's stools (bowel movements) will be green or yellow and soft. This varies; in breast-fed babies, stools may be looser (more liquid).
- ! ● If your baby goes for more than 6 hours without wetting the diaper, this may be a sign of dehydration, which can develop very quickly in babies. If stools are very watery and frequent (diarrhea), this may be a sign of illness, especially if your baby has a fever. (However, it's normal for babies to pass stool every time they feed.)
- *Emotions/postpartum depression.* It's normal for new mothers to feel tired and “stressed out.” As much as possible, keep in touch with your sources of support (family, friends). Some new mothers may develop postpartum depression in the weeks and months following the birth of a new baby.
- ! ● *If you feel down or unhappy or are having trouble handling the demands of caring for a new baby, call your doctor's office.*
- *Taking baby out.* Your baby must be in an approved car seat every time he or she goes in the car. It is fine to take your baby out for walks in a stroller. Dress your baby appropriately for the weather; there is no need to “overdress” your baby on warm days. On sunny days, keep the baby's skin covered, since babies get sunburned easily.
- A parent (or other responsible caregiver) needs to be present at all times. It's fine to leave your baby in another room, as long as you can hear him or her if she cries.
- *Skin rashes.* There are several types of skin rashes that are common and harmless in newborns. Just to be sure, ask your doctor if your newborn develops a rash.

- *Doctor's office visits.* The doctor will want to see your infant for several “well-baby” visits. The first visit will probably be 2 or 3 days after your baby goes home, with another visit at 1 or 2 weeks. (Your doctor may recommend a different office visit schedule.)

- At these visits, the doctor will check to make sure your baby is doing all right, give recommended immunizations (vaccinations), and answer any questions about infant care. Between office visits, it's a good idea to write down any questions you want to ask your doctor.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if you have questions or concerns about caring for your baby.

Between well-baby visits, call our office immediately if any of the following occur: 

- Vomiting (not just simple spitting-up).
- Diarrhea.
- Dehydration (caused by vomiting or diarrhea).
 - Baby going over 6 hours without wetting the diaper. (With highly absorbent disposable diapers, this may be hard to judge. It may help to place a cotton ball on the penis or vagina.)
 - Reduced wetness inside the mouth.
 - Irritability or extreme tiredness.
 - In very severe cases, sunken eyes or “soft spot” (fontanelle).
- If you're not sure your baby is getting enough breast milk or formula.
- Your baby is running a fever—temperature 100.4°F (38°C) or higher, measured by a rectal thermometer. Even without a fever, call if your baby is irritable or refusing to eat.
- Umbilical cord problems, especially redness of the skin around the cord, active bleeding, fluid coming from the cord stump, or very foul odor.
- Excessive crying.
- Depression in the mother—feeling overwhelmed.
- Jaundice: yellow or orange color of the baby's skin.