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COLIC

When Your Baby Has Colic


By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

The Problem

Your baby who is less than 3 months of age is healthy and well fed (not hungry) but has unexplained, intermittent bouts of crying one or two times per day. The crying began when the child was less than 4 weeks old. Episodes usually last one to two hours and the baby acts fine in between. He is usually consolable when held.

The Cause

When babies cry without being hungry, overheated, or in pain, we call it colic. About 10% of babies have colic. While no one is certain what causes it, these babies seem to want to be cuddled or to go to sleep.



Colic tends to occur in high-need babies with sensitive temperaments. In the long haul, these children tend to remain more sensitive and alert to their surroundings. Colic is not the result of bad parenting so don't blame yourself. An allergy to cow's milk may cause crying in a few babies but this is likely only if your baby also has diarrhea or vomiting.

Colic is not caused by abdominal pain. The reason the belly muscles feel hard during crying is that a baby uses these muscles to cry. Young babies also draw up the legs and pass lots of gas during crying regardless of the cause.

Colicky crying is harmless to your baby. The hard crying starts to improve spontaneously at 2 months of age and normally is gone by 3 months. Although you can't eliminate the crying, you can dramatically reduce the amount of time your baby spends crying each day.

The Solution

Cuddle and rock your baby whenever he cries. A soothing, rhythmic activity is the best way to help a baby relax, settle down, and go to sleep. You can't spoil a baby during the first 3 or 4 months of life. You might try one or more of the following:

- Cuddle your child in a rocking chair.
- Rock your child in a cradle.
- Place your child in a front-pack or pouch, which frees your hands for housework.
- Place your child in a wind-up swing.
- Take your child for a stroller (or buggy) ride.
- Try anything else you think may help—a pacifier or warm bath, for example.

If all else fails, you might try SleepTight, a device that attaches to the crib and simulates the vibration and sound of a moving car. This gadget has lessened colicky crying in over 90% of babies. It costs about \$60. For more information, call 1-800-325-3550.

Try these feeding strategies. Don't feed your baby every time he cries. Hunger is only one reason babies cry. Babies who feed too often during the day become hungry frequently at night. It takes about two hours for the stomach to empty, so wait that long between feedings. If you are breast-feeding, however, nurse your baby every time he cries until your milk supply is well established and your baby is gaining weight (about two weeks). Also, don't consume coffee, tea, cola, and other stimulants.

If you suspect your child is allergic to cow's milk, try a soy formula for three days (or, if you are breast-feeding, avoid all forms of cow's milk in your diet). If the crying improves dramatically when your child is off cow's milk, call us for advice.

A last resort: Let your baby cry. If none of the soothing measures quiet your baby after 30 minutes of trying, and she has been fed recently, your baby is probably trying to go to sleep. She needs you to minimize outside stimuli while she tries to find her own way to sleep). Wrap her up and place her stomach-down in the crib. She will probably be somewhat restless until she falls asleep. If she cries for longer than 15 minutes, pick her up and try the soothing activities again.

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Promote nighttime sleep versus daytime sleep. Try to keep your infant from sleeping excessively during the day. If he has napped for three hours, gently awaken him and entertain or feed him, depending on his needs. In this way, the time when your infant sleeps the longest (often five hours) will occur during the night.

Avoid these common mistakes. If you are breast feeding don't stop. If your baby seems to need extra calories, talk with a lactation specialist about ways to increase your milk supply. If you are formula-feeding don't change formulas unless your baby also has diarrhea or vomiting. Special formulas rarely help colic.

The available medicines are ineffective and many (especially those containing Phenobarbital) are dangerous for children this age. Medicines that slow intestinal activity (anticholinergics) can cause fever or constipation. The ones that remove gas bubbles have been shown not to reduce crying. Inserting a thermometer or suppository into the rectum to "release gas" does nothing except irritate the anal sphincter. For best results stay with TLC (tender loving care).

Get rest and help for yourself. While fussy crying can be reduced, what's left must be endured and shared. Avoid fatigue and exhaustion. Get at least one nap a day in case the night goes badly. Ask your spouse, a friend or a relative for help with other children and chores. Caring for a colicky baby is a two-person job. Hire a baby-sitter so you can get out of the house and clear your mind. Talk to someone every day about your mixed feelings. The screaming can drive anyone to desperation.

Take steps to prevent later sleep problems. Although babies need to be held when they are

crying, they don't need to be held all the time. If you rock your baby until she goes to sleep even when she isn't crying, she won't be able to get to sleep without you, and the crying will likely continue beyond 3 months of age. To prevent this, put your baby in the crib when she is drowsy but not crying; let her learn to comfort herself and put herself to sleep. Don't rock or nurse her to sleep at these times. Colic can't be prevented, but secondary problems can be.

Call our office IMMEDIATELY if:

- Your baby's cry becomes a cry of pain rather than fussiness.
- The cry becomes high-pitched.
- Your baby cries constantly for more than three hours.
- You are afraid you might hurt your baby.
- You can't find a way to soothe your baby.

Call our office during regular hours if:

- The crying began after 1 month of age.
- The crying continues after your baby reaches 3 months of age.
- Diarrhea, vomiting, or constipation occurs with the crying.
- Your baby is not gaining weight and may be hungry.
- You are exhausted from all the crying.
- Your baby cries mainly when you're trying to sleep.
- You have other questions or concerns.

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