

# Baby Colic

Colic is common and distressing. However, it usually goes by the age of 3-4 months. The cause is not known. There are no medicines that will stop colic. Ways which may help to ease colic in some cases, and some tips on how to cope, are given below.

## A typical baby with colic

Colic is common in new-born babies. A healthy new-born baby may have periods of crying, typically in the early evening. For no apparent reason they cry as if in pain. The usual methods of comforting do not seem to work very well. They don't want to feed, they may pull their knees up, and sometimes their abdomen (tummy) appears to 'rumble'. Their cry may sound different and more piercing than normal. The baby may appear to be settling when suddenly another bout of crying occurs. This may go on and off for several hours until the baby settles and falls asleep.

The rest of the time the baby is fine. However, the bouts of colic occur regularly, commonly every evening. Bouts of colic gradually become less frequent, and have gone in most babies by the age of 3-4 months.

## Variations on a theme

In some babies, a period of restlessness in the evening may be all that you notice. In some babies with severe colic, the crying may go on for many hours throughout the day (and/or night). However, the baby is fine between episodes, feeds well, grows well, and does not show any other signs of illness.

## What causes colic?

Some parents feel that they have done something wrong in some way. This is not so. The cause of colic is not known. There are many theories. There is some evidence that sensitivity to cow's milk *may sometimes* play a part. The term 'colic' is used as it is thought the baby has pain in the abdomen (tummy). This may be so, but the cause of the pain is not clear. There is no test for colic, and there is nothing abnormal found if a doctor examines the baby.

## Managing a colicky baby

There is no treatment that cures colic. Every parent has their own way of coping and may find different things helpful. Try not to despair. You have to remember that there is nothing you have done to cause the colic and that colic usually goes by 3-4 months of age, often much sooner. Sometimes parents become angry, tearful, or resentful towards a baby with colic. These are normal and common emotions. The following may help.

### Reducing anxiety

Even new-born babies may sense anxiety. This can make things worse. Try to create a relaxed atmosphere. If possible, have a rest and meal before the colic begins (usually in the evening). The more rested and relaxed you are, the better you will be able to cope.

### Soothing

It is natural to try and soothe a crying baby. However, there is some evidence to suggest that 'over handling' of crying babies may make things worse. It is acceptable to leave a baby to cry for short periods if you are satisfied they are not hungry, wet, or ill. Try not to immediately pick the baby up as soon as they cry. Try to avoid holding the baby for long periods. This may be difficult as the natural instinct is to try to comfort. However, a colicky baby may simply not be comforted. Leaving the baby in their cot for a short while may be the best thing to do at times.

**Time-out**

Friends or other family members may be willing to help. Try and avoid several people fussing at once as this may cause anxiety. It may be sensible to leave the coping to one person at a time. Take it in turns if you have help. If possible, it is good to have 'time-out' and leave someone else to look after the baby for a few hours.

**Lactose intolerance**

One theory is that lactose (a sugar in milk) causes or aggravates colic in some babies. If colic is severe, your doctor or health visitor may advise a trial for a few days to eliminate lactose from the milk. For breast fed babies this involves giving the baby some lactase - an enzyme (chemical) which breaks down lactose in the gut. For bottle fed babies it involves either using a low-lactose milk formula, or adding lactase to a usual milk formula to break down the lactose. (A pharmacist or health visitor will be able to advise on a low-lactose milk formula.)

If there is an improvement then continue until the baby is about 12 weeks old. Then gradually wean back onto usual milk over one week.

**Cow's milk**

A sensitivity to cow's milk is another theory for colic. Studies have shown that *some* babies cry less if cow's milk is stopped. This does not occur in most babies. However, if colic is severe it may be worth trying without cow's milk for one week. If the baby is breast fed, this means mum having no dairy products as part of the cow's milk can get into breast milk. If the baby is bottle fed, this means changing from a formula based on cow's milk to a 'hypoallergenic' formula. A pharmacist or health visitor will be able to advise on a suitable milk formula.

- If there is an improvement then continue as above until the baby is three months old by. By this time the colic is likely to have settled. You can then resume a normal diet for baby (and mum if breast feeding).
- If there is no improvement after one week, there is no point continuing. Just go back to a normal diet for baby (and mum if breast feeding).

**Medicines and soya milk formulas**

Gripe water and Infacol are used by some people. However, there is little evidence that they work. Also, it used to be popular to try soya milk formulas. However, there is concern that soya milk may cause delayed side-effects, so it is not usually suitable for treating colic.

**Popular but non-proven advice**

The following tips are often given. However, the advice is based on individual experiences as there is a lack of research evidence to prove that they help. So, they may or may not be helpful.

**If you are breast feeding**

Some foods can get into breast milk. It is difficult to prove if colic is made worse by foods eaten by the mother. Some women say that their baby's colic becomes worse if they eat garlic or spices. Some women have said that stopping caffeine improves the situation. Caffeine is found in tea, coffee, and cola. It is also added to some painkillers such as Solpadeine. If you suspect a food, drink, or medicine is making colic worse, try going without it for a week. It is unlikely to be a cause of colic if there is no improvement within a week.

**Noise**

Some people say that 'white noise' helps to soothe colicky babies. White noise is background, non-specific noise such as made by vacuum cleaners, washing machines, etc. You can even buy tapes of white noise which claim to soothe crying babies. Again, there is lack of proof that this is effective in most babies, but may be worth a try.

**Car rides**

Crying babies may settle on car journeys. It is possibly the white noise of the car engine and the gentle movements of the car that do the trick.

## Complementary and alternative remedies

Many alternative therapies are promoted and advertised for colic. None have been proved to be effective with research studies, and they may be expensive. Note: not all alternative therapies are without risk. For example, some herbal products such as star anise have caused serious reactions in some babies, and are not recommended.

## Further help and advice

Contact your health visitor if you are struggling, or are at 'the end of your tether'. The following may also be helpful

### **CRY-SIS**

Helpline: 020 7404 5011 - every day from 9am - 10pm

This is a support group for families with excessively crying, sleepless, and demanding children.

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Comprehensive patient resources are available at [www.patient.co.uk](http://www.patient.co.uk)