

# Crying and Unsettled Babies

Crying is normal in babies. It is the only way for you to know there is something upsetting them and the only way they can communicate with you. When babies cry they may be hungry, thirsty, too hot, too cold, need a nappy change, off colour, sick in the tummy, in pain, over tired or uncomfortable. Babies may pull up their legs, clench their fists, go red in the face and become very distressed. Some babies cry a lot even when their parents are very attentive.

Parents often feel their baby cries more than other babies, or more than expected. There is a wide range of normal crying. The crying is usually worse in the afternoons and evenings. Some babies may develop severe episodes of crying when they are a few weeks old. After six to eight weeks these episodes of crying usually become less intense and most babies become more settled at around four to five months old. Studies show babies fuss or cry about two hours a day on average. Some babies will cry more than others.

'Colic' is the common word used to describe regular times of crying and not settling in a baby. It is now understood that 'colic' refers to the normal range of unsettled behaviour in many babies. This can be very demanding and exhausting for parents.

## Coping with your feelings

It is very hard to always be patient with your baby, especially when they are crying.

- If there is someone nearby to help, give them the baby while you take a break.
- If you are on your own, you may need to take a break particularly if you have any built up feelings of anger. Remove yourself from the situation by putting your baby down in a safe place and walk away. Go outside perhaps, and take some deep breaths, phone someone or make a cup of tea. When you feel calmer, go back to your baby and try to settle him/her.
- It is important to look after yourself when you have a young baby who depends on you. Take up offers of help and have regular breaks when you can.
- If you are getting so down that you are not able to enjoy your baby, or you are often tearful or feeling depressed, it is important to talk to your doctor, child health nurse or counsellor.

If your baby is very upset, or his/her crying is different to their normal cry, or there are other signs that he/she might be unwell (such as not feeding well, having trouble breathing, has a fever, vomiting or having runny poo), see a doctor.



## What you can do

Try these and over time you will learn what works best for you and your baby.

- Try to stay calm. If you get upset or distressed this may make the situation worse and your baby may become more upset.
- Wrapping or swaddling in a cotton sheet can be calming and help a baby sleep for longer.
- Babies often need a lot of soothing and holding when they are very upset. Babies will not develop bad habits or become spoilt if they are comforted and soothed.
- Avoid constantly changing your baby from one position to another or continually picking up and putting your baby down. You can rock or sway gently, or walk around slowly with your baby if it helps, but avoid fast, frantic or rough movements.
- Baby slings are great to provide the comfort and contact that babies need when you have something else to do.
- Let your baby suck on his/her fist, fingers or thumb. Sucking can help calm your baby and reduce the crying. Dummies help some babies to settle.
- Most babies settle when taken for a walk in the pram and the exercise helps parents feel better too.
- Try giving a warm bath. Some babies will relax and enjoy a bath, but others will tense up and not like it. Never leave your baby alone in the bath.
- Try distracting your baby with a favourite toy. Don't keep trying if it's not working.
- Soften the lighting. Some babies are distressed by looking into bright lights.
- Soft music, rhythmic sounds or continuous machine noises (such as the noise made by a washing machine) soothe some babies.

## For more information contact

- Local Community Child Health Nurse or family Doctor
- Ngala Family Resource Centre Helpline  
8am to 8pm 7 days a week  
Telephone (08) 9368 9368  
Outside metro area – Freecall 1800 111 546  
[www.ngala.com.au](http://www.ngala.com.au)

**This document can be made available in alternative formats on request for a person with a disability.**

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**Child and Adolescent Health Service**

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