



Coping with a crying baby during the COVID-19 pandemic

Introduction

It is hard at the best of times coping with a crying baby. However, it is much more difficult when you are confined to the house and separated from your usual activities and support from family and friends. With this in mind, we have put together a few facts on infant crying which we hope you find helpful - and, most importantly, some tips on how to get through this time and feel more in control and safe.

A few facts about crying.

- Crying is the normal way for babies to communicate and is therefore something all babies do. Babies often start to cry more frequently from about two weeks of age. This can be any time of day, but it commonly occurs in the late afternoon or evening.
- It isn't unusual for a baby to cry from one to five hours daily, with a peak during the first two months of life then usually lessening by the fourth or fifth month. This is recognised as the normal crying curve.
- Prolonged crying was traditionally referred to as colic, but evidence shows that just 5% of infants cry a lot because of a serious medical condition. Most babies who cry a lot are well and develop normally.
- Some crying may be inconsolable and the baby resists all attempts of soothing. The baby may appear to be in pain, even when they are not.
- Crying allows babies to build close relationships with the people that they need to care for them. In this way, crying may be central to the formation of an emotional bond or "attachment" with parents or caregiver.

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For additional Parent Tips see www.ihv.org.uk

The information in this resource was updated on 14/04/2020 and will be reviewed again in 04/2022 and when new evidence becomes available.

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When should you worry about a baby's crying?

If you are not sure if your baby is seriously ill - you can find more information here: <https://bit.ly/3a8lOAz>. You should seek professional or medical help if your baby displays any of the following:

- A high-pitched cry or one that does not sound like a normal cry.
- If they appear ill with a temperature but their hands and feet are cold.
- If they have a fit (seizure or convulsion).
- If they are breathing rapidly, have noisy breathing, are struggling to breathe, or are sucking their stomach under their ribcage (chest indrawing).
- If their skin is blue, mottled, grey (ashen) or they have very pale skin.
- If they have a high temperature as follows: -
 - for babies under 3 months - a temperature above 38°C / 100.4°F
 - for babies 3-6 months of age - a temperature above 39°C / 102.2°F.
- You should seek urgent medical help if your baby has a rash that doesn't fade when you press a glass against it as this can be a sign of meningitis – information on how to do this is available here: <https://bit.ly/2JRdsUi>

Coping with a crying baby – what can you do?

A baby's cry is not designed to be ignored and it is very stressful and overwhelming to listen to. That's especially the case when you have tried everything and nothing has worked. It can leave you feeling upset and angry, and an inadequate parent.

Firstly – this is not your fault: babies do cry and are often inconsolable. It also does not mean that you are a “bad parent” if you cannot soothe or calm them.

What you **DO** and how you **RESPOND** matters. It is important that you keep your baby safe. Small babies are fragile and should not be handled roughly or shaken, as this is dangerous and can cause serious brain damage. A moment of frustration or anger can last a lifetime. If you are struggling with your baby's crying it is important that you:

1. Put your baby down in a safe place (such as their cot) – your crying baby will not be harmed by leaving them safely for 5 or 10 minutes whilst you calm down and take a break.

2. Put some distance between you, leave the room and focus on doing something to help you calm down. Such as listening to music, making tea, phoning a friend, taking long deep breaths.
3. Think positive thoughts and focus on how you are keeping your baby safe and doing the right thing by taking a break to calm down. Feelings of guilt, failure or distress will not help you - when these thoughts come into your mind, make a choice to ignore them.
4. Be positive: your baby is well; this is the normal peak of crying that many babies go through and it is temporary. How much worse would it be if your baby was ill or quiet?
5. Take 5 minutes and do not go back to your baby until you feel in control (information on where you can find more help and support is listed on page 3).

Things you can do to soothe your crying baby

Here is a list of things to try to calm a baby. Every baby is different - it takes time to get to know your baby and the things that they like and find soothing. Some things may work some of the time but be prepared that sometimes nothing will work. Take frequent breaks to calm yourself. It is easier to calm an upset baby if you feel calm.

If you can be calm and contain their distress, this helps your baby even if it does not stop the crying. Think about how they may be feeling and wonder with them out loud - “are you feeling tired? Is there too much going on and you need a break? I think you've got trapped wind - it will pass - I know it feels painful”. This helps both of you to make sense of what is going on. They won't understand the words but will feel comforted by hearing your soothing words and tone of voice.

Check the obvious things like hunger, dirty nappy, boredom, pain.

- If you are breastfeeding, let them suckle at your breast.
- If formula fed, you can offer a dummy. If breastfeeding is established, a dummy can be given from 4 weeks onwards. Sucking helps relieve pain and distress. See link for safe sleeping and dummy use: bit.ly/2NLR0gs
- Gentle handling and a calm, quiet atmosphere can help.
- Shhh noise or gentle noise in the background may help – white noise is proven to help calm babies.
- Move about gently, holding and swaying with them, rocking them or dancing gently with them. This can take some time to help, but persistence often works.

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- Try gentle stroking (baby massage) and notice how your baby responds - pick up on your baby's cues, you will quickly see whether or not your baby is enjoying being massaged. Stop if it is not working for your baby this time. Avoid using any oils or lotions until your baby is at least a month old. Talk soothingly as you do it and keep the room warm enough. When lockdown is over, some health centres and clinics run baby massage courses. For information, ask your midwife or health visitor.
- A warm bath may help calm some babies, but it may make other babies cry more.
- Changing position and giving them something different to look at – distract them with toys, music or being close to you and cuddles.
- Having them in a sling can help as can swaddling a baby. However, both of these need to be done safely. See here: <https://bit.ly/3c3zSO7>
- Try stroking your baby's back firmly and rhythmically, holding them against you or lying face downwards on your lap.
- Gently bicycling their legs may help.
- Rocking them in the pram or going out for a walk. And don't forget that you will need to stick to the guidance on social distancing during COVID-19 restrictions.
- Rhythms repeated over and over in a rhythmic way such as sounds, touch, movement, musical patterns.
- Classical guitar music and music by Bach, Brahms and Beethoven have all been reported to help crying babies.
- Singing and talking to them.
- Sometimes doing things with them may upset them more as it is too stimulating. Some babies may like calm, quiet and dark with no stimulation.
- Older babies may have a favourite comfort object that helps calm them, like a cloth or soft toy.
- A fleecy fabric may help, but do not put your baby in their cot with loose blankets. Follow Lullaby Trust advice for safer sleeping during COVID-19: <https://bit.ly/2yXTxkq>.
- Repeating things can be soothing, anything repeated can work: it can be sights, sounds, touches or smells. Songs and lullabies have repeated parts as this is known to be calming.
- Going outside if you can. The noise is often not so bad outdoors.
- Babies don't always need to be picked up: sometimes just seeing your face can help them calm and settle.
- See here for Association of Infant Mental Health films on "Getting to know your baby" – including baby states and soothing techniques: <https://bit.ly/2JO3AL4>

Where to get help

If you are struggling and feeling overwhelmed, please don't struggle on alone as there is help for you. **Please contact your health visitor.**

The following organisations offer help and support:

- ICON - Babies cry, you can cope advice: <https://bit.ly/2xvuyVd>
- The Association of Infant Mental Health has useful videos for parents on crying, sleeping and soothing see here: <https://bit.ly/2JO3AL4>
- CRY-SIS offers help and support to parents of sleepless and crying infants. They have a 7 day a week helpline, 0851 228 669, open from 9am-10pm for parents to have support to cope with crying infants. See here: <https://bit.ly/3e4fQoy>
- The National Childbirth Trust NCT has a guide on how to keep calm with a crying baby, available here: <https://bit.ly/2Rml59y>
- The Period of Purple Crying website has lots of useful information and videos on coping with infant crying, see here: <https://bit.ly/3bYt986>
- NHS Soothing a crying baby: <https://bit.ly/2XlRkzG>
- Channel Mum offer online peer support, resources, films and also have an online health visitor. See here: <https://bit.ly/2USzxYO>
- The Lullaby Trust - Safe sleeping advice: <https://bit.ly/2Rqf8lt>
- The NSPCC offer a helpline and support on 0808 800 5000.

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