

# Colic Behavior: Crying That is Unexplained

## Information for Parents



Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University

### Anne McDonald Culp, Ph.D.

Human Development Specialist

### Suellen Scott, Ph.D.

Home Economist

Most parents wonder what to do when their newborn baby cries and they have tried everything to help their baby! This crying is called "colic" and is experienced by many babies.

Colic is crying which starts and stops without any reason. The crying can get louder and louder and then stop abruptly. It can start during the first week of life, and can last up to four months, but usually goes away when your baby is about three months old. Usually the crying will be during late afternoon and early evening. The crying can be sudden, and last from 20 minutes to four hours. Most parents find it very difficult to soothe the baby during one of these episodes.

Some babies cry because they are too hot, too cold, hungry, have a dirty diaper, or their stomachs hurt. In these cases, parents can help! You can take off extra clothes, put more clothes on, feed the baby, or change a diaper. If your baby is acting sick, please call your doctor and have the baby checked.

### Advice for the parents of a baby who cries for no reason:

- Remain calm. The crying is not caused by the parents being anxious, although it is best to stay calm while your baby is crying. This will calm the baby faster than if you get upset, angry, or nervous.
- Rock your baby in a rocking chair. Calm rocking is soothing and comforting. Babies like rhythm and this helps babies calm down. Rocking does not spoil the baby.
- Take the baby outside in the stroller.
- Massage the baby gently with lotion on the arms and legs.
- Place the baby in a front pack/pouch and carry the baby around the house. The pouch should



have head support of some type. Keep your arms free so you can do household activities.

- Check with a doctor before giving medication or changing formula. Medication or formula changes are usually not as helpful as the activities mentioned above.
- Set up a regular daily routine. Babies like their world to make sense! Try to keep the same times for eating, for sleeping, and for playing. Knowing what to expect next helps a baby learn to trust and feel secure.
- Try not to overfeed your baby. Food is not a solution to distress. Your baby will learn to cry and associates crying with food. This pattern of learning is unhealthy. Rule of thumb is not to feed your baby more than every two hours.
- Give yourself permission to let the baby cry him/herself to sleep, especially when all else fails.
- Do one activity at a time: either rocking back and forth, or talking or singing to your child.

Your baby might be crying because too much is going on (talking, rocking, noises, television). Try to make things quiet.

- Find out what your baby likes. Some babies do not like cuddling, pacifiers, or being swaddled.
- Have a friend come over to give you a break. This will help take some of the stress away, and you will have a chance to relax.
- Avoid getting too tired yourself! When the child is sleeping, it is okay for you to take this time for a nap.
- Tell yourself that colic is common and is not your fault, or the baby's. If you get angry, do not shake or harm your baby. Place the baby in the crib and let the baby cry to sleep. Find something or someone to distract you.

## References

Brazelton, T. B. (1992). *Touchpoints*. New York: Allison-Wesley Publishing Company.

Carey, W. B. (1984). Colic or primary excessive crying as an infant - environment intervention. *Pediatric Clinics of North America*, 31(5), 993-1005.

Papousek, H., Jurgens, U. & Papousek, M. (Eds.) (1992). *Nonverbal vocal communication: Comparative and developmental approaches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

St. James-Roberts, I. & Halil, T. (1991). Infant crying patterns in the first year: Normal community and clinical findings. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 32(6), 951-968.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank HECE Ambassadors for their financial assistance and support for the partial cost of writing this publication.