

Patient leaflets from the BMJ Group

Colic in babies

If your baby has colic, you can feel anxious and exhausted. There's no cure for colic, but there are things you can try which may comfort your baby.

What is colic?

Babies who have colic are not ill, but they cry a lot more than babies usually do. Colic usually starts when a baby is a few weeks old and stops at 4 or 5 months. No one knows what causes it.

Some researchers think that colic could be caused by wind or painful bowel cramps. Some babies might be sensitive to lactose, a sugar that's in cow's milk. Other babies may be sensitive to protein in cow's milk.

But other researchers think that colic isn't caused by stomach problems. They think that some babies just cry a lot and some parents are more worried by their baby's crying.

There are things that may trigger colic in some babies, although researchers don't know for sure. Here are some examples.

- What the mother eats and drinks, if she is breastfeeding. Chocolate, dairy products, spicy food, caffeine (found in coffee, tea, cola and some other drinks), and some fruits and vegetables may bring on colic.
- Medicine the mother might be taking that goes through to the breast milk.
- Fast bottle feeding. If your baby feeds in less than 20 minutes, the hole in the bottle's teat might be too large.
- Worrying or feeling anxious about the baby.

It's important to remember that colic isn't caused by you doing anything wrong. And it won't harm your baby.

What are the symptoms?

Here are some signs that your baby might have colic.

- Your baby often starts crying suddenly. The cry is high-pitched and nothing you do seems to help.
- The crying begins at the same time each day, often in the afternoon or evening.
- Your baby might draw their legs up when they cry, and their tummy might look swollen.
- Your baby might clench their hands.
- Your baby's face might flush.
- The crying can last for minutes or hours.

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- The crying often winds down when your baby is exhausted or when they have passed wind or a stool.

If you are worried about your baby, you should see your doctor. They will check whether something else is causing your baby to cry.

You should also see your doctor if your baby has a temperature, forceful vomiting, diarrhoea or blood in their stools, or if their pattern of crying changes suddenly.

Sometimes babies cry for other reasons, such as a wet nappy. They might also be hungry, too hot or cold, or in pain.

What treatments work?

No single treatment for colic has been shown to work for sure. You will probably want to try different things.

Things you can do yourself

There are lots of things you can try, although there isn't much research about whether they work.

You might try **driving around in the car** to soothe your baby. Some parents try **baby massage**. There are classes you can take to learn how to do this. One small study found that massage seemed to help some babies. As long as you are gentle, side effects seem unlikely. But if you use oil, check with a health professional to see if the ingredients are safe for your baby.

Many parents **carry their baby around more, often for hours**, to try to comfort them. But there hasn't been enough research to know whether this works.

Some parents use the **noise** of a vacuum cleaner or hair dryer. **Running a tap** or **moving your baby** into a new room or environment may help. If your baby is bottle feeding, you can also buy special **teats** that are designed to stop air getting into the feed.

Treatments you can buy at a pharmacy or health food shop

A lot of parents use **gripe water**. But there's no evidence to say whether it can help.

Simeticone is a medicine to help prevent wind. You can get it as drops. Brand names include Dentinox and Infacol. But there hasn't been enough research to say whether it will help.

Studies don't mention any side effects in babies given simeticone. It isn't absorbed by the body, so it should be safe.

Probiotics are tiny organisms, usually bacteria, that are sometimes used to help digestion. These 'friendly bacteria' are found in many foods but are also available in supplements, including drops. One study found that almost all babies given probiotic drops cried much less, but more research needs to be done before we know for sure whether probiotics

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can help. Probiotics are similar to bacteria that live in your baby's stomach and are unlikely to cause harm.

Switching formulas

If your baby is bottle fed, switching to a formula called **whey hydrolysate** might help your baby cry less. But you should do this only under the guidance of your doctor or another health professional, such as your health visitor. If your baby is otherwise thriving, it's probably not a good idea to change milks.

Whey hydrolysate milk has been treated to avoid an allergic reaction in babies. The brand name is Pepti-Junior.

Other types of special formula which some people try for colic include **casein hydrolysate**, **low-lactose milk** (lactose is the sugar in milk) and **soya-based formulas**. But there hasn't been enough research to say if any of these will help with your baby's colic. And there's no evidence that simply switching brands of formula will help.

Soya contains high levels of hormones that may affect how the baby develops. Doctors don't usually advise it.

Other treatments

Cranial osteopathy uses gentle pressure on the bones of the cranium (the top of the head) to help with colic. But there hasn't been any research to say whether cranial osteopathy works or whether it is safe.

We don't know if **herbal tea** can help with colic. Some herbs have side effects, so you should check with your doctor or nurse before giving your baby a herbal treatment.

What will happen to my baby?

Your baby should be over colic by the time they're 4 or 5 months old. In the meantime, try not to worry as long as your baby is eating well and gaining weight normally.

Here are some things you can try to comfort your baby and help stop the crying.

- Hold your baby in an upright position, to help any wind to pass.
- If you are breastfeeding, allow your baby to finish one breast before you offer the second. Try to avoid eating or drinking things that may upset your baby.
- If you are bottle feeding, make sure that the hole in the teat is not too large. You should avoid feeding your baby too quickly.
- Take a break. Let friends or family help look after your baby.

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