

Colic in babies - Information for parents

What is colic?

Colic is the medical term for excessive, frequent crying in a baby who appears to be otherwise healthy and well fed. It is a common yet poorly understood condition, affecting up to one in five babies.

Colic usually begins within the first few weeks of life but often stops by the time the baby is four months old, and by six months at the latest.

In most cases, the intense crying occurs in the late afternoon or evening and usually lasts for several hours. You may also notice that your baby's face becomes flushed, and they may clench their fists, draw their knees up to their tummy, or arch their back.

If your baby has colic, they may appear to be in distress. However, the crying outbursts are not harmful and your baby will continue to feed and gain weight normally.

There is no clear evidence that colic has any long-term effects on a baby's health.

Seeing your GP

You **should** see your GP if your baby cries excessively.

This is so your GP can rule out conditions that may be causing your baby's crying, such as eczema or gastro-oesophageal reflux disease (a condition where stomach acid moves back out of the stomach and into the oesophagus or gullet).

If no other cause of your baby's symptoms can be found, a diagnosis of colic could be made.

Advice for parents

Having to care for a baby with colic can be distressing for parents, particularly first-time parents. It is important to remember that:

- **Your baby's colic is not your fault**

It does not mean your baby is unwell, or that you are doing something wrong, or that your baby is rejecting you.

- **Your baby will get better eventually**
- **You should look after your own wellbeing**

If possible, ask friends and family for support, as it is important that you can take a break and rest when your baby is asleep.

Support groups, such as Cry-sis (see below) can also offer help and advice if you need it.

Where can I get reliable information about colic and how to manage it?

Much of the information in this leaflet is taken from the NHS Choices website, and this website contains lots more information on the subject of colic in babies, including tips for helping your baby, treating colic, and when to call a GP immediately.

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Colic/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

The NHS choices website also has a section on soothing a crying baby.

<http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/soothing-crying-baby.aspx#close>

Cry-sis is an organisation that offers support for families with excessively crying, sleepless and demanding babies. They have a helpline on 08451 228669, open 7 days a week from 9am to 10pm.

<http://www.cry-sis.org.uk/index.html>

The NCT (a UK charity for parents) website also provides information about colic in babies.

<http://www.nct.org.uk/parenting/coping-colic>

You can also speak to your health visitor and GP for further information and advice.

Are there treatments for colic that I can get on prescription or buy?

As colic improves on its own, medical treatment is not usually recommended. However, if you have problems coping, contact your GP for advice about possible medical treatments.

There is little good evidence of the effectiveness of most treatments for colic, although some parents do find them helpful. It may be worthwhile giving the treatments mentioned below a try (one at a time, **excluding** gripe water) for about a week or so to see if they help your baby.

If you think a treatment helps and decide to continue it, you should try to wean the treatment off (reducing use over about a week) when your baby is 3–4 months old. If you have trouble weaning the treatment off for any reason, such as the symptoms recurring, you should consult your GP.

Possible treatments

Lactase

Lactase is an enzyme that helps break down a sugar called lactose, which is found in breast and formula milk. Your baby may have short-term problems digesting lactose, which could contribute to their symptoms. However the evidence to support using lactase is limited. Lactase is available by the brand name Colief®, and is a food supplement, not a medicine.

If your GP has diagnosed your baby with colic and you want to try lactase:

- **A one-week trial of lactase drops is usually recommended.** If your baby's symptoms do not improve within this time, it is usually felt that there is little point carrying on with the treatment.
- **It is important to follow the package instructions on how to use the product.** If using formula, the Department of Health recommend that feeds should be freshly made up as needed to reduce the risk of infection for the baby.
- **There are limited circumstances where a GP is allowed to prescribe Colief® on an NHS prescription,** and parents often need to buy it (e.g. from a pharmacy) if they want to try it.

Simeticone drops

Simeticone drops, such as Infacol® and Dentinox Colic Drops®, are designed to help release bubbles of trapped air in your baby's digestive system, however there is currently no convincing evidence that they help. Some parents still like to try them and assess their baby individually for signs of benefit.

If your GP has diagnosed your baby with colic and you want to try simeticone:

- **A one-week trial of simeticone drops is usually recommended.** If your baby's symptoms do not improve within this time, it is usually felt that there is little point carrying on with the treatment.
- **You should buy the simeticone drops** from a pharmacy rather than ask the GP to prescribe them.

Removing cows' milk

It is possible that your baby may have developed a short-term intolerance to proteins found in cows' milk and other dairy products.

If you are breastfeeding, your GP may recommend removing dairy products from your diet for a week to see if your baby's symptoms improve.

If you decide to continue with a dairy-free diet after this point, you will need to take additional calcium supplements to ensure you maintain good bone health.

If your baby is formula fed, your GP may advise trying a hypoallergenic milk formula. This type of milk has low levels of the protein that may be causing intolerance. Again, you can try using it for a week to see if your baby's symptoms improve.

These options should be used under the guidance of your GP so discuss them with your GP before trying them.

Gripe water

Gripe water has traditionally been suggested for for colic, but is not licensed for this use and there is **not any evidence** for its use in treating colic.

There are more appropriate ways to manage colic so we do not recommend gripe water.

June 2018