

Maximizing sleep for your family

What is Normal?

Sleeping through the night and self-soothing is a developmental milestone (like crawling or walking) that different babies will reach at different times. It is common and normal for babies to wake during the night for many months, but every baby is different (schedules or food usually have nothing to do with this). Your baby will begin to self-comfort and to sleep for longer stretches at his own developmental pace. At some point, your child will sleep through the night - even if you do nothing to encourage it.

Probably one of the main reasons that night-waking babies are such a big issue is that parents don't have realistic expectations of the sleep patterns of babies. We are bombarded with magazine articles and books that perpetuate the myth that babies should not have nighttime needs. Babies were *designed* to wake up often at night to feed and cuddle -- keep in mind that many adults wake during the night, too. If our expectations for babies were not so different from our babies' expectations for themselves, much of this "problem" might disappear.

Some facts from research on normal infant sleep:

- Frequent night waking that disturbs parents is common in newborns and from 4-12 months.
- Many babies sleep through at least once by 3 months, but most begin waking more often around 4-6 months, with another peak around 9 months.
- Around 84% of babies wake during the night at 6 months and around half of all babies wake at night at 12 months.
- Regular night waking is less common by 24 months.

Many tend to look at nighttime breastfeeding only from a nutritional standpoint, but this is only part of the story. Within a few months, your baby will begin to associate the breast with far more than just a way to satisfy hunger and thirst. It becomes a place of comfort, security, warmth, closeness, and familiarity. The act of breastfeeding is not just nourishing; it is **nurturing**. These needs are every bit as real as baby's physical ones, and having them met is every bit as needful to baby's overall development.

If your baby's night waking is not a problem for you, then there is no reason to try to change anything. If your baby's night waking is affecting your quality of life, then there are ways to try and to gently modify baby's patterns to better fit your own needs. Don't let anyone tell you that you are doing a bad thing by breastfeeding at night -- when you comfort and feed baby at night, you are not teaching him a bad habit: you are teaching baby that you are there for him when he needs you.

Getting your baby to sleep is *not* a battle to be won, as it is so often portrayed in books and the media. The real goal should be for your family to get the sleep they need, while respecting the needs of the youngest family member(s).

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Revised 6/5/05

Common reasons for night waking

- Hunger, thirst, growth spurts or developmental advances. Baby may wake/breastfeed more right before or after learning to turn over, crawl, talk, etc.
- Babies of working mothers may reverse cycle to get more time and most of their nourishment from mom.
- Teething, allergies, reflux or rashes may wake baby.
- Room temperature too hot or cold may wake baby.
- Baby may start or increase night waking when solid foods are started due to digestive upset. Consider avoiding solids in the evening, or decreasing or eliminating solids until baby's digestive system matures more. Studies have shown that solids (including cereal) do not increase sleep.
- Illness. If baby suddenly increases night waking, watch for illness.

Maximize breastfeeding to increase nighttime sleep

- Get help if breastfeeding is not going well. If baby is not nursing well he will need to nurse more often.
- Offer to breastfeed more during the day so baby takes in more milk during the daytime hours.
- Minimize distractions. Babies, especially around 4 & 9 months, can be so distracted during the day that they need to get more of their nourishment at night.
- Tank up before bedtime. Nurse often in the hours leading up to bedtime (at least every 1-2 hours). Some mothers nurse on *one breast only* during this time period so that baby gets more of the higher fat milk that helps baby go longer between feedings. When baby wakes at night, try nursing on the *other* breast until morning, again so that baby gets more of the higher-fat milk.
- Listen to your child. Don't automatically assume that your child is not hungry or thirsty. Many adults wake at night for a drink of water or to get a snack.

Maximize sleep for the entire family

- Begin settling baby before he's overtired, as some babies have a hard time going to sleep if overtired.
- Dream feed. Breastfeed baby right before you go to bed (even if baby is already asleep), so that you get a longer period of sleep before the next waking. Many babies barely wake, but still get a good feeding in.
- Try different sleep arrangements. Find out what sleeping arrangement work best for the entire family while still meeting baby's needs for food & comfort. Some options:
 - **Full-time co-sleeping**. Many babies sleep better when they are close to mom. As with crib use, all safety guidelines should be followed.
 - **Part-time co-sleeping**. Part-time co-sleeping works for many families, where baby sleeps in his crib until the first night waking and then joins mom for the rest of the night.
 - **Separate beds**. Keep baby close by -- when baby is nearby, parents can respond quicker and everyone gets back to sleep quicker.

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