

# Sleep and settling for early childhood

## Factsheet 1: Typical sleep behaviour: newborns 0–3 months



## Summary

- Newborns generally sleep 12 – 16 hours in a 24-hour period and do not know the difference between day and night.
- Newborns need regular feeding, so they usually sleep and short periods.
- Newborns sleep in short bursts, known as sleep cycles which are usually around 20 – 50 minutes long.
- In the first three months of life, babies cry a lot – it is their main way of communicating.
- From approximately two weeks to three to four months of age, newborns go through a stage of increased crying, which will be at its worst at six to eight weeks of age.

## Sleep patterns and behaviours

Crying is the way babies communicate with you. In the first three months, newborns cry a lot because they need your help to feed, change or settle so they can get back to sleep. Although they seem to spend a lot of time sleeping, generally sleep 12–16 hours in a 24-hour period, they do not have established sleep-wake rhythms like we do. These first three months are an important time for you and your baby to start to learn and understand each other.

Sometimes newborn babies cry for no apparent reason, even though you have helped to soothe them. This is normal – as long as your baby is growing, gaining weight and is happy at other times. However, if you are worried about your newborn’s crying, please talk to your maternal and child health nurse, doctor or phone the Maternal and Child health Line on Tel: 13 22 29.

## Sleep rhythms

Newborns do not know the difference between day and night. They do not have established sleep–wake rhythms.

Newborns wake frequently during the night, often because they need to be fed or changed.

At around three months of age, they may start to learn the rhythm of day and night.

You can help your newborn learn to sleep more at night by exposing them to light and gently playing with them during the day. You can also provide a dim and quiet environment at night.

## Sleep cycles

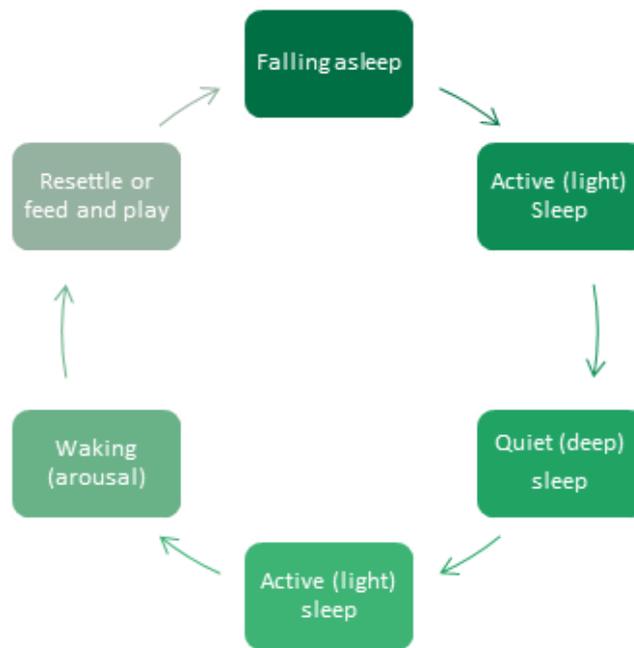
We all have sleep cycles. These change as we develop and grow.

Newborns sleep in short bursts, known as sleep cycles. Sleep cycles are usually around 20–50 minutes long.

Sleep cycles consist of active sleep and quiet sleep. During active sleep, the newborn may move, groan, open their eyes, cry out or breathe noisily or irregularly. During quiet sleep, they will lie relatively still and their breathing will be more even. Figure 1 shows the circular pattern of typical sleep cycles of a newborn.

It is a part of normal sleep cycles for newborns to wake between sleep cycles. As they get older, they will learn to settle themselves and fall back to sleep.

**Figure 1: Typical sleep cycle of a newborn.**



## Settling

A newborn's ability to settle themselves between sleep cycles is called self-settling. Different babies have different temperaments, personalities and self-settling abilities.

You can help your newborn to settle by:

- Putting them in their cot when they are tired, but still awake
- recognising and responding to **tired signs**
- using a gentle, positive and consistent routine, such as **feed, play, sleep**
- using different approaches to settle your baby

It is important to create positive sleep associations for your newborn. Some settling approaches may be hard to keep doing for the long term, such as holding your newborn until they fall asleep. These can create a negative sleep association for your newborn, resulting in them needing to be held to fall asleep. You need to decide what is right for you and your family.

To find out more about each of the things in this list, download 'Factsheet 7: Preventing sleep concerns: babies 0–6 months' from the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>.

## Feeding

Newborns need regular feeding, so they usually sleep in short periods.

The first three months are an important time for both you and your baby to learn how to feed and to develop a routine together.

Being breastfed or formula feed does not impact on the age at which your baby will sleep through the night.

Using a sleep routine that prioritises your newborn's feeding needs, rather than trying to establish a strict sleeping routine is important.

## Crying

The average newborn cries and fusses almost three hours a day until around three to six months of age. Some newborns cry more than this.

Newborns are usually the most unsettled during their first three months. They also have their longest periods of crying during this time.

A lot of this crying and fussing tends to happen in the late afternoon and evening.

Crying is a newborn's main way of communicating, you should respond calmly and consistently.

Sometimes, there is no clear reason why a newborn is crying. They may not stop crying even though you try to help them settle.

From approximately two weeks to three to four months of age, newborns go through a stage of increased crying, which peaks around six to eight weeks of age.

The crying may be difficult to soothe. If you need to take a break, place your newborn in their cot or another safe place and take a break for a few minutes. Your self-care is important. To find out more about your self-care, download Factsheet 14: Selfcare for parents and caregivers from the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

This is a completely normal part of newborn development. There is no need for concern, as long as your baby is growing, gaining weight and is happy at other times.

If you are worried about your newborn's crying, please talk to your maternal and child health nurse, doctor or phone the Maternal and Child Health Line on Tel: 13 22 29.

To receive this form in an accessible format [email Maternal and Child Health and Parenting](mailto:MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au) <MCH@dhhs.vic.gov.au>.

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Available at the [Better Health Channel](https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health) <<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/child-health>>.

This factsheet is based on research undertaken by KPMG on behalf of the Department of Health and Human Services. The research included a comprehensive overview of contemporary research and evidence-based approaches and interventions for sleep and settling in early childhood. It considered developmentally appropriate strategies and cultural diversity. Download the full research report from the [MCH Service webpage](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health) <<https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/maternal-child-health>>.