



# How Your Baby Sleeps...

## Did you know that your baby sleeps differently than you?

- Have you ever said: "I slept like a baby!?" While you may have slept well, the fact is you really don't want to sleep like a baby.
- A baby's sleep is full of interruptions in the early months.
- Babies have twice as many light sleep cycles as adults and experience more light sleep than deep sleep. Their overall sleep cycles are shorter than an adult's and they often do not know how to put themselves back to sleep.
- Babies go to sleep differently than adults. Adults go directly into deep sleep, but babies may take up to 20 to 40 minutes before entering deep sleep.

## How much sleep does my baby need?

As you have probably already found out, babies sleep a lot, but not always when you want them to.

Most young babies sleep 15 to 18 hours in a 24 hour period but only tend to sleep in 2 to 3 hour blocks, including during the night. They wake up to eat and socialize. Their day and night routines (circadian rhythm) are not yet formed. It may be a while before they sleep for long periods at night.

Every baby's sleep pattern is unique. Sometimes babies who had a difficult birth, or were premature, may take longer to sleep through the night. A very busy daytime environment may also affect your baby's ability to sleep longer at night. Some babies (and adults, too) need less sleep than others. Your baby's sleep pattern, particularly from birth to about 6 months, reflect temperament and biological traits, not your parenting skills!

## How can I help my baby develop good sleeping habits?

When your baby sleeps, let her . It is not a good idea to try and force your baby into some kind of sleeping pattern. Try to relax and enjoy the quiet hours.

Try setting a bedtime routine. This routine is something you and your baby do just before bedtime. It signals to your baby that bedtime is near.

Be calm and loving. Your baby needs you during the night just as much as during the day. If your baby wakes in the middle of the night try to keep your baby in her bed and do only what's needed to settle her. You may have to change a diaper or feed your baby. If so, try to avoid distractions that might stimulate her. Keeping the lights dimmed and your voice soft will help your baby go back to sleep.

### Ways to calm your baby to signal it is bedtime:

- ✓ singing softly or humming
- ✓ a bath
- ✓ reading
- ✓ rocking
- ✓ kisses
- ✓ a backrub or patting back
- ✓ soothing music

## How will my baby's sleep patterns change?

When your baby reaches six months of age, she may be taking several naps during the day and the rest will be nighttime sleep. Young children under the age of two may still wake several times each night, just as most adults do. Many babies will be able to go back to sleep without any help from you, but some will need you to help them learn to go back to sleep on their own. As your baby grows, her sleep pattern will become more regular. Remember that some babies and children will always need more sleep and some will need less.

## Why do some babies develop flat spots on their heads?

The safest way to put a baby to sleep is on their back. Babies who sleep on their back are much less likely to die of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). However, this has resulted in an increase in the number of babies developing 'flat spots' on their head.

Babies' skulls are very soft and the bones can be affected by pressure. They tend to turn their heads to one side when placed on their backs.

If babies always have their head in the same position, their skull may flatten. This is known as "flat head". A little bit of flattening will go away on its own. More serious flattening may be permanent, but will not affect a baby's brain or development.



## How can I help prevent my baby from developing a flat head?

- Each day, change your baby's position in the crib. Start by placing your baby with her head at the top of the crib. The next day, place your baby with her head at the foot of the crib.
- Consider putting a mobile on the side of the crib to encourage your baby to look that way.
- Provide supervised 'tummy time' several times a day when baby is awake adding a few minutes each day. Not only will this help prevent a flat spot on their head, but it is important for development too.
- Limit the amount of time that your baby sleeps in car seats and other infant seats.

If you think your baby has flat spots, talk to your Health Care Provider.

*(Reference: The Canadian Paediatric Society, [www.cps.ca](http://www.cps.ca))*

### Key sleeping points to remember...

- A baby's sleep cycle is shorter than an adult's, with more light sleep than deep sleep.
- Babies fall asleep differently than adults; they go into light sleep for 20-40 minutes before settling into deep sleep - this means if you put them down too early they will probably wake up.
- From birth to 6 months sleep patterns reflect your baby's biological development, not your parenting skills!
- Some babies will need more sleep and some will need less. Every baby is different!
- Let your baby sleep when she wants to sleep unless otherwise recommended by your Health Care Provider.
- Start bedtime routines to teach your baby that sleep time is coming.
- Your baby needs you just as much during the night during the day. Be calm and loving when your baby needs you at night.

See also: "**Safe Sleep for Your Baby**"

*Adapted with permission from the Oxford County Board of Health - November 2005  
and Niagara Region Public Health 2007*