

How can I prevent SIDS or “crib death” in my baby?

- Always placing baby to sleep on their back is the most important prevention measure. “Back to sleep” at both naps and nighttime. Side sleeping is not recommended.
- Use a firm sleep surface. Crib or bassinet mattresses should be firm and fit tightly with no space between it and the sides. Crib slats should be no more than 2-3/8” apart. Sitting devices such as car seats, carriers and swings should not be used for sleep.
- Loose objects and soft bedding should not be in the baby’s sleep area.
- Infants should sleep in the parents’ bedroom, close to the parents’ bed for as long as possible. This is most important in the first 6 months of life.
- Offer a pacifier at naps and bedtime. It does not need to be reinserted once the infant falls asleep.
- Avoid overheating and head coverings. Infants can be dressed in the same weight clothing as adults, using no more than 1 extra layer.

Why is sleep so important? Sleep is like food for the growing brain. Poor sleep in infants puts them at higher risk for later emotional, attentional and behavioral problems, as well as obesity. Though adults have ways to handle lost sleep, infants do not. Infants who sleep poorly are living with permanent “jet lag”.

What is normal sleep in babies? Sleep experts recommend 14 to 15 hours of sleep per day for 3- to 11-month olds. Most American babies do not get this, sleeping an average of 12.7 hours per day. The main cause of sleep-starved babies is a late bedtime. Because infants usually wake up at sunrise, no matter when they go to bed, later bedtimes mean less sleep. Infants generally need soothing and help to sleep until about 3 to 4 months old. Most infants should self-soothe to sleep (not feeding, not rocking) by 6 months old.

If my baby is sleep starved, why won’t he sleep? Sleepiness is driven not just by the need for sleep but also by the biological clock. At certain times of day, it is very hard to fall asleep. The windows of time when infants are able to fall asleep might be just a few minutes. If missed, you will have a miserable, tired infant on your hands. Worse, one of the major causes of crying in the middle of the night is too little sleep during the day.

How do I know if my baby is sleep starved? Look for these clues:

- He can *only* sleep while riding in a car or stroller, or while in a swing.
- He *always* falls asleep in the car or stroller—motion always triggers sleep.
- He only catnaps for short periods—about 20 minutes at a stretch.
- He naps less than 3 hours total during the day.
- He has no regular nap schedule (morning, afternoon, and sometimes evening naps).
- He can only fall asleep while feeding.

When will night feedings stop? Infants rarely refuse food in the middle of the night. All infants wake up at night about every 90 minutes. The good sleepers go back to sleep without making a noise. The poor sleepers cry. Too little daytime sleep (not hunger) is the most common cause of nighttime crying. By 2 months old, infants can sleep at least 4 hours. By 4 months, they can go 8 hours. After 2 months old, try other soothing methods before feeding.

Understand the infant sleep cycle. Infants have a 90 minute alertness cycle. After waking up, the drowsiest time happens about 90 minutes later. This drowsy window (usually a few minutes) does not make them sleep. It only makes sleep possible. If he is not allowed to sleep, the cycle clock resets, and he will get drowsy again 90 minutes later. With age, they become better able to stay awake for 3 hours then for 4½ hours. Look for “sleepy signals” near this 90 minute mark.

Recognize the sleep signals. Unexplained fussiness is the most common signal. Look for these others:

- Mood—crying and whining without obvious cause.
- Attention—loss of attention, spacey expression, loss of interaction.
- Motor—eye rubbing, yawning, poor coordination, falling down, dropping objects.

When should infants sleep through the night? Most infants should learn this between 4 and 7 months. For those infants who awaken every night or cannot fall asleep at bedtime, sleep training is needed. We can discuss this at 4 to 6 months old if needed.

When do naps stop? Most infants stop napping in the evening by 9 to 12 months old. The morning nap usually disappears between 12 and 18 months. The afternoon nap can continue until 6 years old.