



Your Child's Sleep

Birth to 6 Months

While all infants develop at their own pace, the development of a baby's sleep pattern tends to follow a predictable course. For many babies, the following process takes from three to six months (a little longer if the child was born prematurely or has been ill).

During the first few weeks the newborn's sleep is poorly organized and unpredictable. The baby may fall asleep anytime, anyplace. Night sleep is interrupted with feedings and the longest period of sleep may be four to six hours. During the day, the baby may take three to six naps which vary from 15 minutes to four hours.

At times, the baby sleeps as much during the day as night, which some refer to as "having days and nights mixed up." During this time, parents are tempted to wake the baby from naps or keep the baby awake thinking this will improve sleep at night. However, neither strategy usually helps. It's best to use a common sense approach: playtime and stimulation in bright light during the day, quiet time and rest in lower light at night. When the infant wakes for a feeding at night, the feeding should be provided quickly and in dim light.

Usually around four to 10 weeks, a baby begins to show consistency in the time he or she falls asleep each evening (often 8 p.m.) and rises each morning (often 6 a.m.). During the night, the child may wake for one to three feedings, but usually returns to sleep quickly. In other words, night sleep becomes more organized and predictable. At this time, the infant takes two to five naps days, which are unpredictable and vary in length.

Parents may be tempted to give cereal to the baby at bedtime or wake the baby late in the evening to provide another bottle believing that the child will "sleep through the night." These strategies are usually ineffective and may cause a delay in the development of the child's sleep pattern. Always check with your doctor before beginning solid foods.

Typically by 3 to 5 months of age, the child's daytime sleep becomes organized, usually into three naps per day. The first nap is often very predictable, occurring one to one and a half hours after the regular morning wake time. The second nap occurs in the afternoon at varying times. The first two naps are usually one and a half to three hours in length. The final nap occurs between 4 and 6 p.m. and may last only 30 to 60 minutes.

By 3 to 5 months of age, babies tend not to fall asleep anywhere, anytime. For example, some infants learn to fall asleep in a crib with a pacifier, others while being held and rocked, and some infants may fall asleep only during a feeding. This is the time parents can strongly influence the manner in which their child falls asleep and make choices as to what may be the most acceptable sleep arrangements for the family for the months and years to come.

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