**Could your baby have colic?**

**Question:**My baby cries inconsolably for at least three hours straight every night and nothing I do seems to help. Is this colic? If so, how do I deal with it?  
 **Answer:**  
  
Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between a genuinely "colicky" baby and a child who is simply unusually fussy or prone to crying. According to a long-standing definition, a baby who cries three hours a day, three days a week, for three weeks in a row has *colic*. A simpler definition is "a whole lot of crying that doesn’t have any obvious medical cause and that can’t be stopped by means of any normal measures."

True colicky episodes tend to occur around the same time each day, usually in the late afternoon or evening. They are marked by intense activity on the baby’s part, such as flailing about or pulling his knees to his chest. From all appearances, the child seems to be in a great deal of discomfort – and he probably is.

Classic theories about the cause of colic have assumed that the baby's intestinal tract is at fault – that it goes into uncontrollable spasms due to immaturity. Other explanations assume that mother is tense or high-strung, and that her nervous stress is somehow communicated to the child. But treatments based on these conjectures tend to be hit and miss in their effectiveness. In actuality, a universal cause for colic has yet to be determined.

**See your doctor**

What should you do if your child displays the symptoms of colic? There are two basic questions you need to address. First, does your baby have a verifiable medical problem? And second, how are mother, child, and the rest of the family going to get through this ordeal?

The first issue should be dealt with relatively quickly. See your pediatrician if any of the follow apply:

A fever over 38 degrees Celsius (100.4 degrees Fahrenheit) taken with a rectal thermometer.

* Poor sucking at breast or bottle.
* Change in colour from normal pink to pale or bluish during feeding or crying (cyanosis).
* Overt vomiting (as opposed to spitting up).
* A marked increase in the amount and looseness of bowel movements.
* Unusual jerking movements of the head, eyes or other muscles.

Even if your baby does not display any of these symptoms, you may still want to have him medically evaluated if he is crying up a storm for no apparent reason. Try to give your physician as much specific information as possible. For example, when did the crying start? How long does it last? Does anything in particular seem to set it off?

**Ways to cope**

If your baby is doing well medically, you can move on to the second question: how to survive these crying marathons? Your primary task at this point is to be there for your child. You may not be able to stop the crying, but you can do a great deal to comfort and soothe your baby. Hold him and rock him gently. Stroke his head, back and stomach. Provide soothing sounds, such as humming or soft singing. Eliminate bright lights and loud sounds. Try nursing your baby or take him for a ride in the car or a stroller. Make sure that mom and dad take turns dealing with a colicky child. Single moms shouldn’t be embarrassed to seek help from an experienced relative or friend. You'll need regular breaks if you're to get through this phase of child-rearing successfully.  
  
Whatever you do, don't allow yourself to feel like a failure. Remind yourself frequently that "this too will surely pass." Each crying episode will eventually come to an end, and the entire phase will probably be over by the third or fourth month. In the meantime, persist in your efforts to soothe your baby even when they don’t produce the desired results.

**Strung out? Talk to a counsellor**

If you find yourself reaching the end of your rope, get help quickly before you’re tempted to take out your anger on the child. In the event that you feel a need to talk with someone about your frustration, feel free to call us here at Focus on the Family Canada. You can reach our counsellors Monday through Friday between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Pacific time at 1.800.661.9800.

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