

Bathing Your Baby

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

At the time Chuck urged his wife to schedule a night out with her friends, he hadn't considered that it meant he would have to give his two-month-old son a bath – a job he had skillfully dodged until then.

Chuck was in a panic. “What if I drop him? Do you use soap? How warm is ‘warm water’?”

His wife phoned her friends to say she would be a little late. “Watch and learn,” she told Chuck. “This isn't rocket science.”

Maybe not, but bathing a baby does require caution, patience, and a willingness to get a little wet.

Before every bath, test the water temperature with your elbow or wrist. The water should be warm, but not hot.

A baby can drown in only a few inches of water, so never leave your baby alone in the bath. If you have to leave the room, take your baby with you, wrapped in a towel.

Infants do not usually need a full bath every day. Sometimes just a sponge bath will do. In a warm room, keep your child wrapped in a towel and wipe each eye with a separate cotton ball, wiping from the corner of the eye toward the outside.

Use a washcloth to wipe around the face and neck, especially the mouth, nose, and ears. Reach under your baby's back and hold the head in your hand so that it tilts backward a bit, squeeze a little water onto the scalp and wipe in a circular motion. Then, wipe off the rest of your baby's body.

Don't poke anything into your baby's ears, nose, or other places. When washing, be firm, but gentle. If you moisten dried food, it will come off without having to scrub.

Follow the same basic rules for a tub bath. Use a bath mat to help prevent your baby from slipping. Special baby baths are also helpful. Only a few inches of water in the tub is necessary.

Keep in mind a soapy baby is hard to hold. So, using a baby soap, soap small areas at a time.

Always keep a baby's face well above the water level. With one hand, reach behind your baby's neck and gently grasp the top of the opposite shoulder with your thumb and the baby's armpit and ribs with your fingers. Let the baby's head rest against your wrist. Do not turn your baby over when washing his or her back. Lean your baby forward across your arm.

Finally, give your baby time to splash and play with the water. A bath should be relaxing and fun. With a little practice, it can be a pleasant experience for you as well.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.