

What To Do About Colic

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Brandon's crying became intense around the age of one month. Every day he cried for several hours. Sometimes the crying would be so fierce that his mother would break down and cry herself.

Brandon's grandmother, on the other hand, dismissed it with a shrug. "It's his nature. He's just a crybaby, like your brother was," she told Brandon's mother. "He'll grow out of it."

Brandon did cry a lot. He had colic.

All babies cry. Most cry between one to three hours a day in their first 6 months of life. But babies with colic – about one in five babies – are different. They cry for three or more hours on more than three late afternoons or nights a week.

Their crying is intense. They may become red-faced, rigid, and pull their legs up against their stomach. They may pass gas or have bowel movements with great force. Their eating and sleeping may be disturbed.

Colic may start as early as two or three weeks and usually ends – sometimes suddenly – around the age of three months. It tends to start and stop a little later with babies who were born premature.

The cause of colic is not clear. Sometimes it might be related to what a baby eats or drinks, but usually it is not. It is not even clear that colic is a special medical condition. It may just be frequent and intense crying.

Parents who suspect their baby has colic should call the doctor. There is no magical cure for colic, but a doctor may check for other causes, adjust a baby's diet, or suggest different ways of caring for your baby.

Sometimes a pleasant walk outside, a quiet car ride, or soft background noise will help soothe a baby with colic, at least for the moment. But never try any extreme home remedies or "cures," no matter what trusted relative or friend swears by them.

Your child's crying is not dangerous, just frustrating. If the crying has you on edge, ask your spouse, another relative, or friends for a hand from time to time.

When babies with colic are not crying, there are perfectly happy and contented, so enjoy these moments together. Remember, you did not cause the colic and your baby cannot control it. Your baby is not mad at you. Be patient and loving as you can, and take comfort in the fact that most babies become much calmer after three months.

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.