

Newborn Reflexes and Behaviors

Definition

- Common questions asked about newborn noises, reflexes and behaviors
- These are normal and not signs of illness

Health Information

Topics Covered

Go directly to the topic that relates to your question for advice.

1. Normal primitive reflexes from immature nervous system
2. Normal jitteriness when crying
3. Normal sleep movements
4. Normal breathing sounds and noises
5. Normal saline to open a newborn's blocked nose
6. Normal irregular breathing patterns
7. Normal GI sounds and noises
8. Normal sleep sounds and noises
9. Normal feeding reflexes
10. Normal protective reflexes

Care Advice

1. **Normal Primitive Reflexes From Immature Nervous System:**
 - **Startle Reflex** (Moro or embrace reflex). Brief stiffening of the body, straightening of arms and opening of hands. Follows noise or abrupt movements. Frequent at birth. Slowly resolves by 4 months of age.
 - **Tonic-Neck Reflex** (Fencer's Reflex). When head is turned to 1 side, the arm and leg on that side straightens. The opposite arm and leg flexes. Goes away by 4 months of age.
 - **Chin Trembling**
 - **Lower Lip Quivering**
 - **Jitters or Trembling** (see Topic 2)
2. **Normal Jitters or Trembling when Crying:**
 - Jitters or trembling of the arms and legs during crying is normal in newborns. It should stop by 1 to 2 months of age.
 - If your baby is jittery when not crying, it could be abnormal. Give her something to suck on. (Reason: Normal trembling should stop with sucking.)
 - Seizures are rare. During seizures, newborns are more than jittery. They have muscle jerking and blinking of the eyes. Babies can also make sucking movements of the mouth. They don't cry during seizures.
 - **Call Your Doctor If:**
 - The jitters get worse
 - The jitters occur when your baby is calm

3. **Normal Sleep Movements:**

- Sleep is not quiet. Expect some of the following:
- Sudden jerks or twitches of the arms, hands or legs. If they only occur during sleep, they are most likely normal.
- How Long: last a few seconds, but can recur
- Timing: soon after falling asleep
- Normal at all ages, not just in newborns
- Suspect a seizure if: jerking occurs when awake or lasts more than 10 seconds

4. **Normal Breathing Sounds and Noises:**

- **Throat Noises.** Caused by air passing through normal saliva or refluxed milk. These gurgling noises are likely to build up during sleep. Slowly, the newborn learns to swallow more often.
- **Nasal Noises** are usually caused by dried mucus in the nose. Your baby most likely doesn't have a cold. A blocked or stuffy nose can interfere with feeding. This is because your baby can't breathe when the mouth is closed with feeding. Therefore, babies need help opening the nasal passages. Clean out a blocked nose with normal saline. (See Advice #5)
- **Tobacco Smoke.** Avoid tobacco smoke which can cause nasal congestion or sneezing. Avoid dust or any strong odors for the same reason.
- **Call Your Doctor If:**
 - Nasal washes don't work
 - Breathing becomes hard

5. **Nasal Saline to Open a Blocked Nose in a Newborn:**

- Use saline (salt water) nose drops or spray. If not available, can use bottled water.
- Use 1 drop and do one side at a time. Repeat this several times.
- This will loosen up the dried mucus. Then it can be sneezed out or swallowed.
- If needed, use a suction bulb. Avoid Q-tips which can injure the lining of the nose.
- Reason for saline nose drops: Suction alone can't remove dried or sticky mucus.

6. **Normal Irregular Breathing Patterns:**

- **Transient Breathing Pauses of Less Than 10 Seconds. Also Called Periodic Breathing.** These breathing pauses are normal if the baby is comfortable during them. A normal rate should be less than 60 breaths per minute. Usually resolves by 1 month of age. **Call your doctor if:** Your baby is breathing fast or turned blue.
- **Transient Rapid Breathing.** Sometimes, newborns take rapid, progressively deeper breaths. This is so they can expand their lungs all the way. This is normal if the breathing slows to normal within a minute or so.
- **Seesaw Breathing.** With breathing, the chest seems to contract when the stomach expands. The cause is the soft rib cage of some newborns. It tends to pull in during normal downward movement of the diaphragm.
- **Yawning or Sighing** (off and on) to open up the lungs
- **Call Your Doctor If:**
 - Breathing becomes hard
 - Breathing pauses last more than 10 seconds
 - You have other questions or concerns

7. **Normal GI Sounds And Noises:**

- Belching air from stomach
- Passing gas per rectum
- NOTE: Both of these are releasing swallowed air. They are normal, harmless and lifelong. They do not cause pain or crying.
- Gurgling or growling noises from the movement of food through the intestines
- Normal grunting with pushing out stools
- Hiccups. Hiccups are often caused by overeating. They can also be from a little acid irritating the lower esophagus. Give your baby a few swallows of water to rinse off the lower esophagus. Hiccups are not caused by an allergy.

8. **Normal Sleep Sounds And Noises:** Normal sleep is not motionless or quiet. Expect some of the following:

- Moving during sleep transitions
- Occasional startle reflex or jerks
- Breathing noises - especially gurgling from secretions that sit in the throat.
- During light sleep, babies can normally whimper, cry, groan or make other strange noises.
- Parents who use a nursery monitor often become concerned about these normal sleep sounds.
- GI tract noises from normal movement of digested food

9. **Normal Feeding Reflexes:**

- **Rooting Reflex.** When the side of the mouth or cheek is touched, your baby turns to that side. He will open his mouth in preparation for nursing. Present until 6 months of age.
- **Sucking Reflex.** Will suck on anything placed in the mouth. This survival reflex does not imply hunger. It is even present right after a feeding. This reflex fades between 6 and 12 months of age.

10. **Normal Protective Reflexes:**

- **Sneezing To Clear Nose of Any Irritant.** Sneezing helps to open the nose. It's usually caused by dust, fuzz, tobacco smoke or other strong odors. If sneezing becomes frequent, use nasal washes. This is not caused by an allergy.
- **Coughing** to clear lower airway
- **Blinking.** After spending 9 months in darkness, newborns have light-sensitive eyes. At first, they prefer to keep their eyes closed. They blink often with light exposure.

Call Your Doctor If

- Your baby starts looking or acting sick
- Your baby starts looking or acting abnormal in any way
- You think your baby needs to be seen

Pediatric Care Advice

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