



Team no sleep?

Expectant parents know their days of restful slumbers are numbered, but nothing quite prepares you for the reality. **Cathy McCormick**, from *HolisticBaby*, shares some thoughts on surviving those early days and nights

The most common topics I hear parents talking about at antenatal classes are the fear of no sleep and the fear of not being able to stop a baby crying! These two things can often overshadow the joy in the early days and months with your baby.

The transition to parenthood is both exciting and daunting. It can be smoother if you've had a straightforward vaginal birth, as these result in high

levels of the hormone oxytocin. This hormone is there to keep us alert, happy and connected to our baby. It is a buffer for tiredness and supports our healing. It helps keep a baby relaxed, yet alert for regular feeds, and supports parents to be calm. It also plays a big part in getting breastfeeding established and milk flowing.

But for some parents, the birth can range anywhere from a little challenging

to a huge, rollercoaster of an event. This can mean you start those early days with lower levels of natural oxytocin and higher levels of stress, anxiety and lack of sleep due to a mixture of medical procedures, feeding routines and a too sleepy or unsettled baby.

For the first few weeks, parents muddle through, hopefully with family and friends supporting them. But other people's lives get busy and



"Infant research says 50% of babies will sleep eight hours without signalling to their parents by 12 months, but that means the other 50% won't be there yet. So know you're not alone if your baby is still waking in the night."

slowly the parents are left in a haze of trying to understand this new little being who is supposed to be sleeping peacefully.

Babies have two main drives to survive: frequent feeding and

developing their brains with lots of new experiences. In the early weeks and often months, feeding and sleep are interconnected. Frequent feeding day and night and short, light sleeps help keep baby safe (albeit exhausting for the parents).

At this stage, a baby's sleep is also directly related to their health. For full-term healthy babies, you generally want to breastfeed 8-12 times every 24 hours to establish the milk supply and sleep patterns. If your baby has had a medical birth or is a smaller or premature baby, then they will need more frequent feeds and may need to be woken for these until they are alert enough and gaining weight.

Most babies sleep a lot during the day in the first few weeks but are up feeding a lot at night. This is normal and gets the right hormones going for breastfeeding. As the mother recovers from the birth, she starts to feel like being more active during the day and

the baby starts to wake more during these hours. Infant research says 50% of babies will sleep eight hours without signalling to their parents by 12 months, but that means the other 50% won't be there yet. So know you're not alone if your baby is still waking in the night.

There are two main things that make our bodies sleep. Firstly, our circadian clock being set so that we know when it's day and when it's night. Babies take about 6-8 weeks to set their clock so as long as we eliminate the obstacles, then we can rely on a baby's biological drive to do this.

I often ask parents to consider the earliest time they could handle an older child being awake for the day. This may be 6 or 7am, so we aim for that. Once the birthing mother has recovered or the other parent or caregiver is able, start opening the curtains around 6 or 7am, or turn the lights on to let the day begin. In the early months, you don't need to wake the baby but you do need to let the light reach them as that gets the key hormone, serotonin, activated. Serotonin is important as it helps with sleeping, eating and digestion. Also, a bonus for the mother is that serotonin helps stabilise our moods and increases feelings of wellbeing. Mornings are a great time, even if you are tired, to get out for a walk - it will benefit both you and your baby.

The second thing that makes our bodies sleep is our sleep-wake homeostasis (sleep pressure), which means being tired enough to go to sleep. For babies, this means being satisfied with enough milk and stimulation to be tired enough to go to sleep. The amount of sleep babies need is highly variable between individuals, just like with adults. If you look into the latest neuroscience research, some babies may sleep as little as 9 hours in 24 and others as much as 18 in 24, but most babies sleep somewhere in between.

Just like a baby learning to feed efficiently and effectively, sleep is also a normal biological function that babies get better at as they get

older. As babies develop they will sleep in bigger blocks. The role of daytime naps is to take a little sleep pressure off so we keep most of their sleep for night-time hours.

Creating a pattern of responding to our baby's communication is an important goal to work towards. This can take months or years to learn, just like in any relationship. It is not always possible to act immediately or fix issues instantly, and you won't always succeed at this, but the aim is to keep ours and our baby's nervous system as relaxed as possible, most of the time.

Being flexible and experimenting with our responses supports the complex parent-baby neurohormonal links. Time and support to get to know your unique baby are what most parents need. A few tips here and their that align with your own values and parenting style can be helpful from an outside observer who you trust, but remember – you are the expert on your baby and ultimately you need to do what feels right for you, your baby and your family.

CATHY'S SLEEP SUPPORT TIPS:

- Think about what's important for you as a family, whether that is routines or being flexible. The goal is to create a calm environment.
- Start with a set wake-up time, as early as works for your family. Try this for a few weeks and see what happens.
- Make the evenings like daytime with lots of light, noise, fun and enjoyable activities, like a bath, massage or time with the other parent who might have been at work all day. This will help your baby go to bed at your bedtime, especially in the early months, so you get more sleep yourself.
- Be as relaxed, gentle and quiet as possible at night (between around 10pm and 6am). Feeds should be quiet, no vigorous burping or unnecessary nappy changes. Do the minimum in a relaxed manner so everyone is back to sleep as easily as possible.
- Make wake times during the day fun with laughter, noise, singing, nappy

"The amount of sleep babies need is highly variable between individuals, just like with adults. If you look into the latest neuroscience research, some babies may sleep as little as 9 hours in 24 and others as much as 18 in 24, but most babies sleep somewhere in between."

changes, nappy-off time, tummy time, chatting and going out and about. The aim of a daytime nap is not a long sleep, but enough to take a small amount of pressure off without returning sleep pressure to zero.

- Try taking three deep breaths and use mindfulness techniques when your baby is going down for their day naps, removing the focus from sleep.
- Have a weekly plan that includes some fun and activities that you enjoy – this will also help you to shift your focus off baby's sleep. Activities outside of the house, that you can take your baby to, can also be beneficial for both of you. Your baby will sleep when they're tired and you get some time out and about. •

Cathy McCormick is an Auckland-based lactation consultant, postnatal midwife and a director of HolisticBaby. She believes in a holistic approach to the wellbeing of babies, mothers and families. To contact Cathy or find out more, visit holisticbaby.co.nz.



the sleep store

Free expert sleep advice & New Zealand's best infant sleep & parenting essentials. Visit our award-winning online store today, shop our range and read real reviews from real parents just like you.



Yogasleep White Noise
"Great white noise machine and The Sleep Store came to the rescue with a super fast order & delivery when I was in need!"
★★★★★



Woolbabe Sleeping Bag
"Don't look further, this is the sleeping bag you need. We love ours and it keeps bubs comfy and cozy"
★★★★★



Beco 8 Carrier
"We absolutely love our Beco 8! Easy to use & our small human loves it after transitioning from our Boba wrap"
★★★★★

VIP Benefits

- Earn SleepPoints Rewards on all purchases
- Redeem points for free gifts & store credit
- All eBook & white noise downloads are FREE!

Create your account today plus new email subscribers can get \$10 off their first purchase \$49+. Go to the Sleep Store online today for details.



Download our Newborn Sleep eBook for free! Log in to your new account & add it to your cart.

thesleepstore.co.nz

facebook.com/SleepStore
instagram.com/thesleepstore



OHbaby! award winner of NZ's Best Online Store and Best Baby Retailer.