

## The New Baby Meets the New Parents

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When we become parents, the first few days of our baby's life are fantastic—that is, they are almost like a fantasy. We are at once happy, exhausted, and frightened. This usually is true for the second and following children as well.

These first days are so important, and they may set the tone for our future attitude as parents. We must learn to be alert and cautious, yet relaxed enough to enjoy the miracle that is unfolding. We must learn to balance what we hear, read, and are told by well-meaning others with our own instincts and what we see before our eyes.

For this purpose I would like to share, both as a parent and a pediatrician, my opinions about what can be expected with new infants so that we can relax and enjoy what is normal and healthy about our children, now and in the future.

First of all, most babies have hiccups and sneezing. This is normal, and there is nothing we need to do about it. Some say nursing cures hiccups, but I say they don't need curing. After nursing, hiccups may continue, but they will stop on their own and are harmless. Sneezing does not necessarily mean our babies are catching colds.

Fast and slow breathing is normal for new babies. They may pant rapidly for a while and then not breathe for ten seconds or even longer. This is called "periodic respiration," and it is normal.

Stuffy noses and noisy nasal breathing are also normal. Dry skin is normal, even with peeling of the hands and feet. Some folks like to apply baby lotion for this, but the peeling also tends to go away on its own no matter what we do or don't do.

Babies don't really get very dirty, so it is not necessary to bathe them every day; even just a few times a week is fine. Also, we ought to avoid using soap on the baby's face. Even though it is very common to see pimples all over a baby's face, particularly around the age of three or four weeks, these, too, go away on their own.

It is very common for babies to have an eye discharge, and unless the whites of the eyes are red and bloodshot (like "pink eye"), you don't need to worry. If the eyes are bloodshot, call the clinic. If there is discharge but the whites are still clear, relax. This is most likely due to clogged tear ducts, which are very, very common. The medical term is dacryostenosis.

I know that some doctors prefer antibiotic eye drops for this condition or the gentle massaging of the tear sac in the corner of the eye, but I prefer to gently wash away the discharge with a clean, lukewarm, moist washcloth. I do not find antibiotics necessary, since this is not an infection. Two of my own children had clogged tear ducts off and on for months, and I find this to be a common story. It does not hurt our babies' vision. If the condition lasts past one year (which is unlikely), we can ask the pediatric eye doctor to check the baby.

It is very common to see a small amount of bleeding from the base of the umbilical cord just before and after the cord falls off. The cord may fall off after a few days or perhaps not for a few weeks. We can help the cord dry out by washing it with alcohol (using a clean cotton applicator—don't worry, you won't hurt anything) both inside and out.

It is very, very common for babies to lose weight after birth, even up to 10 per cent of their birth weight. It may take them two weeks to get back to the birth weight. If a baby is sucking well and wetting the diaper three or four times in 24 hours, relax.

Some breast-fed babies have a stool with every nursing, while others may have a stool only once a week. A baby does not have to have stool every day. If it doesn't bother the baby, it

needn't bother us. In the rare situation that the baby is uncomfortable, the belly is distended, there is poor nursing or vomiting, or there is no stool for three or four days, please call.

For baby girls, some slight spotting of blood in the diaper or slightly bloody mucus from the vagina may be seen. This is normal. Also, clear mucus from the vagina is normal, and it serves as a natural barrier. You do not need to wash it away. If there is stool, it should be gently cleared with a clean, lukewarm, moist washcloth. Pink spotting often is seen in the diapers of boy or girl babies. This is normal too.

Diaper wipes are usually okay, but some babies are sensitive to them and may develop a diaper rash. In this case, instead clean the diaper area with a washcloth and lukewarm water until the rash is cleared. Certain ointments or creams, such as A and D, Desitin, or Aquaphor, can serve to protect the skin in the diaper area from irritation caused by urine and stool.

The baby's first stool is usually thick, sticky, and dark green or nearly black. This is known as meconium, and within a few days the stool color should lighten by shades until it is yellowish. The consistency may be like mustard.

I do believe it is important to listen to advice from friends and family and, particularly, from the doctor or nurse practitioner, but after a while, if family members who mean well are giving five different types of conflicting advice, it is a good idea to turn to your own doctor and your own instincts. When you decide how you will treat your own baby, it's fine to say politely, "Well, this is how WE do it in OUR family."

It is normal to be nervous and scared with our new babies. We worry about them, just as our parents worried (and may still worry) about us! Parenthood is often emotional beyond description. Even though I am a pediatrician and my wife is a post-partum nurse, you should know that we worried about each of our babies too, even when there was really nothing to worry about. It is nature's way! You are always welcome to call if you have questions and concerns.

And don't forget to relax, scratch each other's backs, and enjoy each day. Babies grow fast, and everything changes faster than we can imagine. Our babies tend to be a lot more sturdy and strong and healthy than we think. Every age has hard stuff and fun stuff. So please allow yourselves to enjoy the challenges and joys of your family, starting from the first day, starting now!