

CARING FOR YOUR BABY AT NIGHT AND WHEN SLEEPING

A guide for parents and primary caregivers



The Baby
Friendly
Initiative

UNITED KINGDOM

unicef 

CARING FOR YOUR BABY AT NIGHT

Becoming a parent is a very special time. Getting to know your new baby and learning how to care for their needs can be one of the most rewarding experiences of your life. However, it can also be challenging, especially when you are tired and your baby is wakeful and wanting to feed frequently during the night.

It might be reassuring to know that it is both normal and essential for your baby to feed during the night. Babies grow quickly in the early weeks and months of their lives and have very small stomachs. Therefore, they need to feed around the clock to meet their needs.




While it can be overwhelming when your sleep is disturbed during the night, it can also be a lovely quiet time to be with your baby away from the bustle and distractions of daytime. Babies rely on the security and comfort of being close to their parents/primary caregivers and need this at night as well as during the day.

GETTING SOME REST

It is important to make sure that you create the right environment to help you get as much rest as possible.

At night keep the room fairly dark – switching on the light wakes everyone up and is not usually needed when you are feeding and comforting your baby.

An illustration showing a woman with dark hair and a yellow top lying in bed, looking towards a baby in a wooden crib. The baby is wearing a yellow top and is tucked under a blue blanket. The scene is set in a bedroom with a white pillow and a grey headboard.

// I try to keep the room calm and peaceful at night. //

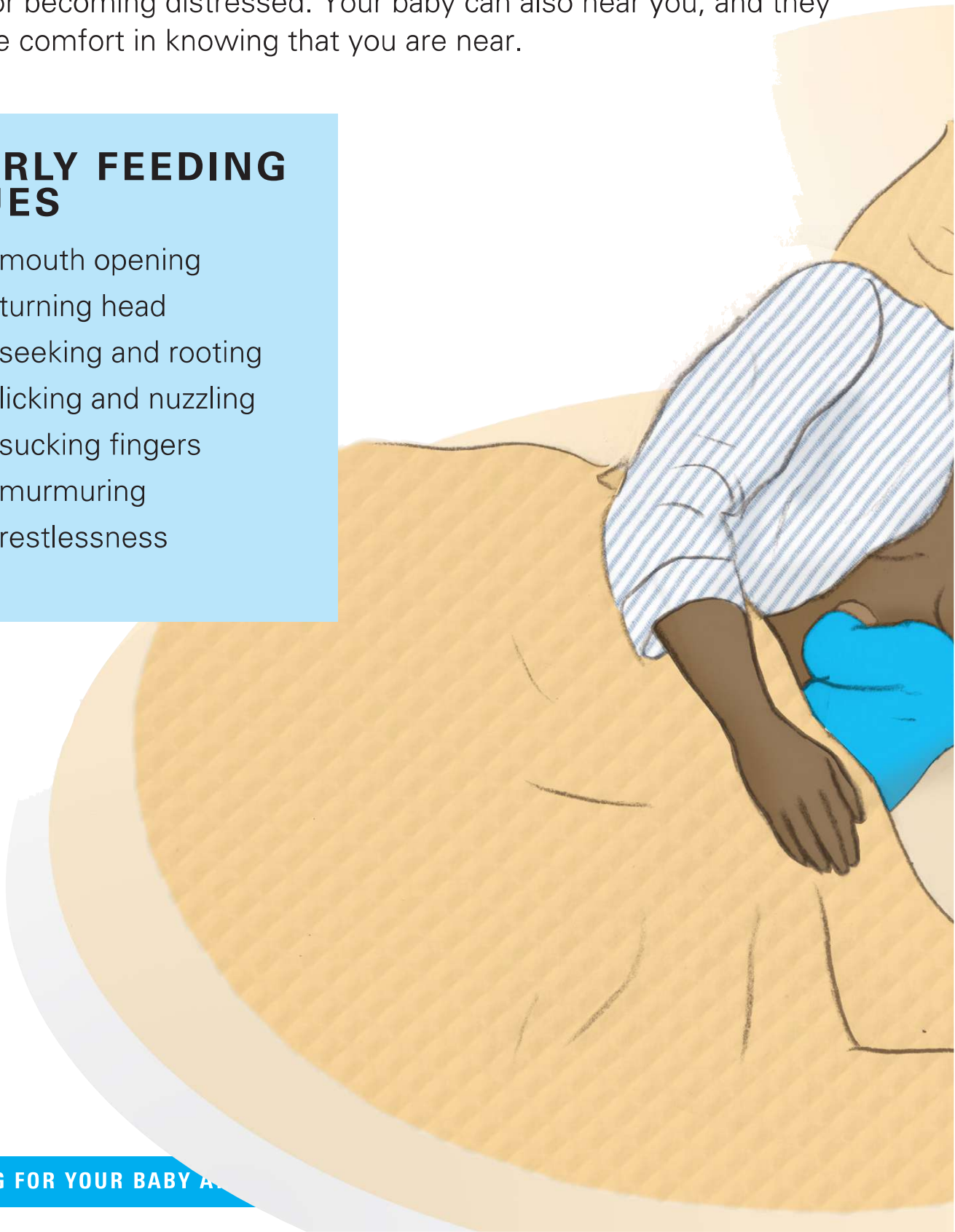
KEEPING BABY CLOSE

Keep your baby close both day and night.

It is safer for your baby to sleep in the same room as you. This means you can hear your baby and respond to their needs before they start crying or becoming distressed. Your baby can also hear you, and they will take comfort in knowing that you are near.

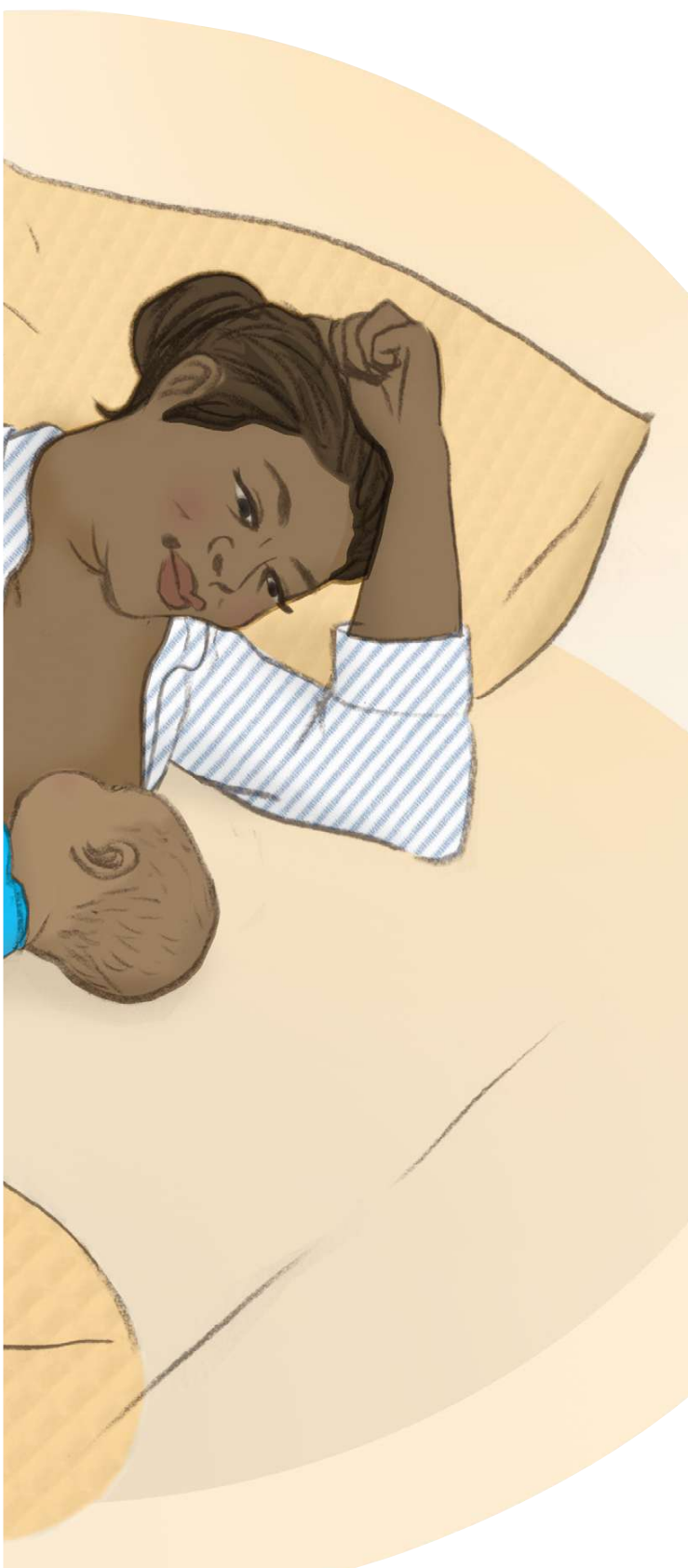
EARLY FEEDING CUES

- mouth opening
- turning head
- seeking and rooting
- licking and nuzzling
- sucking fingers
- murmuring
- restlessness



BREASTFEEDING

You may choose to feed your baby whilst lying in bed. Ask your midwife or health visitor to help you find a safe and comfortable position. Also see the safety information on page 11.



TIPS FOR PARTNERS

- Make sure your partner is comfortable when breastfeeding.
- Help by passing things so your partner doesn't have to reach for them.
- Support your partner so that they can access drinks, snacks and other things they may need without interrupting their breastfeeding position once they and the baby are comfortable.
- Give plenty of support – breastfeeding is important for the health of both your baby and partner.

BOTTLE FEEDING WITH INFANT FORMULA

The following information is important for parents/primary caregivers who are feeding their baby with infant formula:

- If you are giving your baby infant formula, first infant formula (whey-based) is the only formula needed in the first year of life.
- When your baby is one year old, they will get more of their energy, vitamins and minerals from food, and full-fat cows' milk can be their main milk drink. There is no need for follow on formula.
- All brands of infant formula must meet minimal UK compositional requirements and therefore all brands are nutritionally adequate and have a similar composition.
- Infant formula is not sterile and can cause infections if made up in advance. To reduce the risk of infection, make up feeds as your baby needs them: one at a time.
- This means you will need to make up feeds during the night. You can make this easier and reduce disturbance at night or when out and about by having bottles and teats sterilised and powder measured out.
- The water used to make up feeds must be above 70°C and can be stored in a vacuum flask. The flask does not need to be sterilised, but should be clean and used only for your baby. If the flask is full and securely sealed, the freshly boiled water will stay above 70°C for several hours.
- You may choose to use ready-to-feed (RTF) infant formula at night or when you go out.

- Never force your baby to take more feed than they need in the hope that they will sleep for longer. Forcing a baby to finish a feed will be distressing and can mean your baby is overfed. This can also cause them to become colicky.
- Instead, feed your baby responsively. Your baby will know how much milk they need.
- Do not add cereal or any other substance to bottle feeds, as it could interfere with responsive feeding.
- When making up infant formula, always follow manufacturers' guidelines with regard to amounts.
- Babies will feel more secure if feeds are given only by the parents or primary caregivers, especially in the early weeks. This will also help with bonding.

Ask your midwife or health visitor for information on how to make up bottle feeds safely.

FIND OUT MORE

Learn more about responsive feeding, including signs that your baby is hungry and how to make up feeds, from Better Health Start for Life and the UNICEF UK Baby Friendly Initiative:

unicef.uk/bottlefeedingresources

Breastfeeding is the healthiest way to feed your baby. If you decide not to breastfeed or to stop breastfeeding, it is possible to restart. Giving infant formula to a breastfed baby will reduce your milk supply. You do not need to eat any special foods while breastfeeding, but it is a good idea for you, just like everyone else, to eat a healthy diet.

WHEN BABIES DON'T SETTLE

There may be times when your baby remains unsettled after feeds. Placing your baby in skin-to-skin contact with you and gently rocking can provide comfort. Your partner (if applicable) can help with this too.

If you are breastfeeding, you can offer your breast again even if your baby has just fed. Babies go to the breast for many reasons, such as food, love and comfort. There is no risk of overfeeding a breastfed baby.

If you have had a particularly disturbed night, try to take time out to rest during the day. Visitors can wait – or help by taking over chores or looking after other children while you and your baby catch up on sleep. If your baby is crying for long periods they may be ill and require a medical check.

If your crying baby is impacting on how you feel, remember it is okay to place your baby in a safe place such as a cot or a baby mat and walk away for a few minutes to calm down. Call for help if you need it. Never shake a baby.

// Skin-to-skin really helped my baby to settle down. We enjoy the time together. //



PUTTING BABY DOWN TO SLEEP

Babies should sleep in a clear, flat, firm, separate sleep space which is easy to create in a cot or Moses basket. We know however that families also bed share, and so caregivers should make their bed safer for baby whether they doze off accidentally or choose to bed share.

To keep your baby safe and to reduce the risk of sudden infant death (sometimes called cot death), always make sure you and anyone caring for your baby are aware of the following points.

- Put your baby on their **BACK** for every sleep, never on their front or side. No special equipment or products are needed to keep them on their back.
- Put your baby in a **CLEAR, FLAT, FIRM, SEPARATE** sleep space.
- Keep your baby **SMOKE-FREE** day and night.

At night, keep the cot or Moses basket beside your bed for at least the first six months. The baby should be placed ‘feet to foot’ – at the bottom of the cot so that they cannot wriggle under the covers.

The baby’s mattress should be firm and flat with no raised or cushioned areas. Soft beds, bean bags, sleep pods and sagging mattresses are not suitable. Bouncy chairs and car seats are not suitable sleep spaces in the house. The sleep space must be kept clear of all items, with nothing in reach such as soft toys or blind cords. Your baby should also not be overdressed or covered with too much bedding (no more than you would use yourself) and this must not be able to cover the baby’s head. Babies should not wear hats indoors.

The room should also not be too hot (16-20°C is ideal). The mattress could have a waterproof cover for cleaning. For more information see the key points on the following page and visit [unicef.uk/bf-safersleep](https://www.unicef.uk/bf-safersleep)

OTHER PLACES YOUR BABY MAY SLEEP

Babies should not sleep in car seats longer than is necessary. Car seats are designed to keep babies safe while travelling, not as a main sleep place. They should only be used for transport for up to two hours at a time and not as an alternative for cots or high chairs. It's okay for your baby to fall asleep in a car seat when travelling, but they should be taken out as soon as you get to your destination, and placed onto a clear, flat, firm, separate surface to sleep.

Babies should not be allowed to sleep in bouncy chairs. You should also never sleep with your baby on a sofa or armchair. Move somewhere safer if you might fall asleep.

Slings and baby-carriers are useful for holding a baby and for keeping them close. Parents/primary caregivers may find using a sling helps to keep baby calm and can be useful to help them sleep.

The safest baby carrier to use will keep the infant firmly in an upright position where the caregiver can always see their baby's face and ensure their airways are free.

When wearing a sling/baby carrier, remember the TICKS guidelines:

- Tight
- In view at all times
- Close enough to kiss
- Keep chin off the chest
- Supported back



Learn more: lullabytrust.org.uk/safer-sleep-advice/swaddling-slings

IF YOU DECIDE TO SHARE A BED WITH YOUR BABY

Some parents/primary caregivers choose to sleep with their baby in bed and some fall asleep with their baby during the night while feeding and comforting – whether they intend to or not. Therefore, it is very important to consider the following points:

- Keep your baby away from the pillows.
- Make sure your baby cannot fall out of bed or become trapped between the mattress and wall.
- Ensure the bedclothes cannot cover your baby's face or head.
- Don't leave your baby alone in the bed, as even very young babies can wriggle into dangerous positions.
- Babies should not be in adult beds with other children or pets.

BEWARE

- It is not safe to bed share if your baby was born very small or preterm.
- Do not sleep with your baby when you have been drinking any alcohol or taking any drugs that may cause drowsiness (legal or illegal).
- Do not sleep with your baby if you or anyone else in the bed is a smoker or vaper.
- Do not put yourself in a situation where you could doze off with your baby on a sofa or armchair.

In these circumstances, it is always best to put baby in their own clear, flat, firm, separate sleep space, such as a cot or Moses basket, and keep them next to you.

WHAT'S HAPPENING NOW?

Having an alcoholic drink? Don't have baby in your bed, as you will be less responsive than normal. It's best to have another adult on hand to help with baby if you have drunk alcohol or taken drugs that make you less aware than normal.

Going on holiday or staying with family or friends? Make sure your baby's sleeping position is safe even when they are not at home: bed positions, mattresses and duvets may not be the same as at home.

Letting your partner sleep? If you feed baby in another room, be aware that falling asleep with baby on a sofa or armchair increases their risk of injury and sudden infant death.

Baby unwell? It's natural and important to keep baby close to you if they are not well. Be careful not to overdress them or use too many covers, especially if they are running a temperature.

Remember that breastfeeding protects your baby against sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) and the more you breastfeed the greater the protection. Babies need to feed during the night, so talk to your midwife or health visitor about feeding positions which help you rest and minimise risk to your baby.

MORE INFORMATION

The Baby Sleep Information Source (BASIS) provides research-based evidence about infant sleep for parents and health professionals. Established by anthropologists at the Durham University Parent-Infant Sleep Lab in collaboration with UNICEF UK, the National Childbirth Trust and La Leche League, BASIS runs as a non-profit-making outreach project of Durham University. basisonline.org.uk

The Institute of Health Visiting (iHV) is a UK Centre of Excellence, supporting the development of high-quality health visiting services. There are five pillars to its work: research, quality assurance, education, leadership and partnership working. Visit the website, which has a section for families: ihv.org.uk

The Lullaby Trust provides expert advice on safer sleep for babies, supports bereaved families and raises awareness on sudden infant death. For more information about SIDS and risks, visit lullabytrust.org.uk or call free **0808 802 6869**. For bereavement support call the free helpline on **0808 802 6868**.

The Royal College of Midwives (RCM) is the UK's only trade union and professional organisation led by midwives for midwives. The RCM promotes midwifery, quality maternity services and professional standards and influences on behalf of its members and for the interests of the women and families for which they care. rcm.org.uk

ABOUT UNICEF

UNICEF works with families, local communities, organisations and governments in more than 190 countries. The UK Committee for UNICEF (UNICEF UK) Baby Friendly Initiative works with hospitals, in community healthcare settings, and universities to help them protect, promote and support breastfeeding and to strengthen mother-baby and family relationships. [unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly](https://www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly)



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