

## 15 things you need to know to keep your baby happy and healthy...

**1. Help her stay asleep.** Sixty percent of infants have a parent with them when they fall asleep, and those babies wake up more often during the night than those who fall asleep alone. It can be a wonderful feeling to rock your baby to sleep but doing so can have negative consequences. All babies naturally wake up throughout the night, but if she associates being rocked with falling asleep, then rocking becomes a crutch, and she won't learn to fall asleep on her own. Three keys for helping your little one stay asleep: Keep to a schedule (after 8 weeks of age, put her down at the same time each night); develop a consistent bedtime routine of three or four pre-bed activities; and lay her down when she is drowsy but not asleep.

**2. Have Baby's ears checked.** Not all newborns' ears are checked before they leave the hospital, but they should be. "Hearing loss is not really rare," says Albert Mehl, M.D. With treatment and a hearing aid, most babies ultimately can have normal or near-normal speech and communication skills, Mehl says. And for kids with significant hearing loss, learning sign language early on is key.



**3. Spend some quiet time each day talking to Baby.** Background noise -- like other kids talking or the drone of the TV -- can slow language development. Devote time to build skills. "Every child should have quality quiet time each day with Mom or Dad where he or she is doing some vocal play," says Linda Crowe, associate professor of communication sciences and disorders at Kansas State University. Vocal play, or babbling and practicing sounds, is one key way your baby lays the groundwork for talking. Crowe's suggestions: **1) Have conversations with Baby.** When he says "goo goo," respond with comments like, "Oh, you're happy," or "That's a good story." Sure, it won't make sense, but it models conversation skills. **2) Point things out, and be repetitive.** As you pass a car on a walk you could say, "That's a car. It's a red car. Cars go 'honk-honk.'" **3) Describe what you are doing as you do it.** As you set the table you could say, "I'm putting the plate on the table. This is a fork. This is a spoon."



**4. Visit the dentist by age 1.** Taking your little one to the dentist by his first birthday is a great way to prevent future dental emergencies. "That first visit is more for the parents," says Jessica Lee, DDS. "We go over basic guidelines and help them start good dental habits for their baby." Tips: Don't give Baby more than 4 ounces of juice a day, start brushing (gently!) as soon as his first tooth comes in, and wean him off the pacifier or thumb by age 4 to avoid affecting the shape of the arch and how his teeth come in.

**5. Evaluate your environment.** A recent study out of Finland found that children under 2 raised in homes with a moldy smell were twice as likely to develop asthma by age 7. The three most common indoor allergens are dust mites, pets and mold. Keep Baby's bedroom as allergen-free as possible. Don't let pets sleep there, and invest in anti-dust-mite bed covers. Avoid humidifiers and vaporizers, because they breed mold and dust mites. Check your shower, ceiling and basement for signs of mold, and fix leaks as quickly as possible.

**6. Keep your home smoke-free.** Secondhand smoke already has been linked to health problems like colic, asthma and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Now, a study of more than 4,000 children finds that babies and children exposed to smoke often have impaired cognitive skills. The researchers also found that little ones exposed to smoke, even at low levels, have greater deficits in reading, math and spatial reasoning later in life.



**7. Pump some iron.** Significant lack of iron is known to cause health problems in babies. Even a small iron deficiency may inhibit cognitive development. Typically, doctors test for iron deficiency with a simple blood test when Baby is 9 to 12 months old. Now, a study finds that a blood test called CHr may detect iron deficiency better than the traditional test. With CHr, researchers identified 83% of the children who were known to be iron-deficient; the standard blood test only identified 26%. Talk with your pediatrician or family physician and find out if the CHr test is available.



**8. Consider a spring/fall flu shot schedule.** Children younger than 2 are more likely to be hospitalized if they get the flu. At 6 months, babies can get their first flu vaccinations. The Centers for Disease Control recommends that previously unvaccinated tots receive two doses of flu vaccine, typically one month apart. But researchers recently found that first-timers who got one shot in spring and a second in fall were as well protected as those who got both in the fall. Because the spring/fall schedule is effective only when the flu vaccine remains the same from year to year, be sure to check with your doctor before choosing the extended schedule.

**9. Dose properly.** A recent study reveals that 41% of parents under-dose their feverish kids with acetaminophen. To give the right dose, base the dose on your baby's weight, not his age. (Most brands offer dosing directions by both weight and age.) Fever is not an illness, but you may want to reduce it for the comfort of the child. If other symptoms accompany the fever -- a rash, consistent vomiting, lethargy for several hours, constant crying or a bad smell to the urine -- consult your doctor as soon as possible.

**10. Introduce grains after Baby is 7 months old.** Researchers recently found that children who were given cereal grains at 3 months were at higher risk for celiac disease, an autoimmune disorder triggered by a food allergy to wheat gluten, than those who weren't fed grains until they were 7 months old.



**11. Swaddle Baby.** Researchers in Belgium found that 6- to 16-week-old babies who were swaddled in a blanket and placed in cribs on their backs slept longer and woke up less often. Other studies show swaddling could help reduce excessive crying and may prevent SIDS. How tightly should one swaddle? Just tight enough so she can't wiggle her arms or legs, but not so tightly that breathing is restricted. Researchers suspect swaddling works partly because the restricted movement keeps babies from waking themselves.

**12. Try signing with Baby.** Even if your baby has perfect hearing, teaching him simple sign language has benefits. It can strengthen the parent-infant bond, increase the child's interest in books, reduce his frustration with being unable to communicate and may help him begin talking earlier. Signing's benefits continue later in life: One study found children who signed as babies had, at age 8, average IQ scores that were 12 points higher than children who didn't sign. Experts recommend using sign language with infants as young as 6 months, but don't get frustrated if Baby doesn't sign back until 16 months. Individual differences are tremendous.



**13. Get the lead out.** One-quarter of homes studied with at least one child under 6 contained significant amounts of paint, dust, soil and plumbing contaminated with lead, a substance that can be absorbed into the bloodstream. High levels of lead in the blood can cause serious health problems, even death or hindered cognitive development. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that parents, particularly those with children between 6 months and 3 years, work to identify possible lead sources in their homes and at day care. AAP also recommends all children have their blood checked for lead at age 1 and at age 2.

**14. Pay attention to Dad's blues, too.** Like moms, dads are at risk for postnatal blues and depression. And researchers from England recently found that children whose fathers had postnatal depression were at increased risk of behavioral and emotional problems between ages 3 and 5. Signs that Dad might suffer from postpartum depression include being irritable, criticizing Mom, staying away from home more, conversing less and drinking more. The solution? Encourage him to see your family doctor, and help him find someone to whom he can talk. Also, involve Dad with the infant; he may feel left out as Mom and Baby bond.



**15. Working parents: Skip the guilt.** The number of hours Mom spends with Baby makes little difference in the child's intellectual or social development. What's more important is how often Mom engages Baby in play or talks to her. A study of more than 1,000 children up to age 3 also found that working moms spent less time on average with their children, but the difference was much smaller than researchers expected. Working moms compensated for lost time by spending more time with Baby on weekends and ditching other activities. In fact, working moms spent a slightly higher proportion of their time with their babies on purely social activities like playing and talking than non-working moms did.

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