



What is Normal in a Newborn?

So now that you have had your baby and are home, you probably will have lots of questions. Many of the concerns and questions that are asked are “standard” newborn questions. I thought that I would make a handout that summarized the top 10 “normal” newborn questions.

1. Gas:

In the first few days of life, babies swallow a lot of air, especially if they are nursing . Until mom’s milk comes in, babies do a lot of sucking but don’t get a lot of liquid. So as a result, there is a stomach full of air. If you think about the stomach, it is basically a balloon like holding tank. Air is very compressible and so if the belly is mostly full of air, it is hard to squeeze it out. Once a baby gets more milk, then the stomach is full of more milk then air after a feeding and burping is more effective. In those first few days, most of that air gets past the stomach and moves along the intestines. Once past the stomach, there is nowhere for it to go but out the other end. Along the way, it causes some havoc with a baby oftentimes passing gas, fussing and pulling their legs up. Oftentimes a little stomach massage and some tummy time will help them to work.

2. Hiccups:

Most moms will note that babies hiccup a lot while in utero. This continues after they are born. A hiccup is a little twitch or spasm of the diaphragm. This muscle sits just above the stomach dividing the chest from the abdomen. When the stomach churns it can “tickle” the diaphragm and cause hiccups. This happens either when the stomach is empty or digesting milk—pretty much all of the time. You can’t stand your baby on their head and have them drink water, and you don’t want to scare them so there is really nothing you can do about the hiccups. It is normal and usually goes away around 4 months of age.

3. Peeling Skin:

Newborn babies have been soaking in a “hot tub” of amniotic fluid for 9 months. As a result they don’t exfoliate the top layer of skin cells that we do when we bathe and change our clothes. These layers build up and after a week or so, when the skin dries out, they start to peel. For some babies this is in flakes and for others it can be in chunks of skin. Usually it is most notable around the feet and ankles but really it happens everywhere. You can moisturize with a hypoallergenic lotion if you’d like but really the problem isn’t so much that the skin is dry but more that it is exfoliating. The peeling usually goes away after about a month or so.

4. “Goofy” Eyes:

When babies are born, their brain is connected to all of the muscles in the body. Even though everything works, they don’t know how to operate the controls. Consequently, babies will flail

their arms and legs around, exercising the muscles and over time and learning how to control things. By about 5 months of age, an infant has developed the ability to move purposely around. They can see a rattle or object in front of them and put it in their mouths. Eye movements that allow us to look from side-to-side and up-and-down are controlled with muscles as well. It takes the same period of time for babies to learn to control these muscle groups. Until they do, babies will often look cross eyed as the brain hasn't mastered lining up the eye muscles and controlling these fine movements. This usually resolves by 6 months. If your baby is still looking cross eyed after this time, let me know as it could be the result of a "lazy eye".

5. Grunting:

Some babies make a lot of noise. Even when they are sleeping, it is fairly common for some newborns to grunt and strain and squeak every few seconds. Although some parents take it as a sign that they are constipated or uncomfortable in some way, it is completely normal. If a baby is in pain, they will cry. If they are just grunters but are eating and pooping well, then there is nothing wrong. Most mothers of newborns feel more comfortable having their baby near them in a bassinet or co-sleeper at night. Sometimes all of the grunting and squeaking noises can create stress and impair the mom's ability to get what little sleep they are allowed. If this is the case, then consider moving the baby down the hall into their own room. Unless you live in a mansion, I guarantee that you will hear them when they really need you.

6. Irregular Breathing:

If you had to drink a quart of milk from a carton non-stop, you would have to take pauses to catch your breath in between gulps. It is hard to coordinate breathing with drinking, yet this is what babies do every time they eat. To help with this process, babies use what is called periodic breathing where they pant quickly for about 5 seconds, then pause for a few seconds, then pant, then pause. It can look very irregular and odd when you really watch them but it is normal. So how do you tell when your baby is having breathing problems? A baby in distress will have to focus on breathing to the exclusion of eating. They will need to breathe fast continually. If your baby is able to eat well, then the breathing must be normal.

7. Bug Bite Rash:

One of the most common newborn rashes that occurs is Erythema Toxicum Neonatorum. This is a red spotty rash that looks like flea bites on the arms, legs and torso. The interesting thing about the rash is that it will be in one place for a few minutes and then be on another place a few minutes later. The rash doesn't bother the baby at all, can occur right from the first day and is usually gone by 2-3 weeks of age.

8. Umbilical Cord:

That lifeline that connects the baby to the mom, delivering oxygen and food to the baby is cut right at birth. The remaining stump quickly dries out looking like a scabby raisin. There is no specific care that needs to be done to the cord other than keeping it clean and dry. There really are no pain receptors in the tissue and even the skin around the belly button has decreased sensation. So even though most parents are nervous about the whole cord separation process, there is nothing that causes the baby pain. Often times as the cord begins to fall off (around 10-14 days of age) there will be a little bit of bleeding around the site, similar to when a child loses a tooth. Once the cord is off, even though it might still appear a bit weepy around the belly button, the baby can have a full on bath. Often times there will be "extra" skin around the

stump causing it to stick out a bit. This extra slack will be taken up as the baby grows over the first few months.

9. Gasping noises:

As mentioned above, babies make a lot of noises and squeaking. One particular noise that a baby makes is when they are clearing liquid (milk, spit up, or saliva) from their vocal cords. Babies are really good at NOT aspirating liquids into their lungs. They protect this from happening by having very sensitive receptors around the vocal cords. When even the smallest amount of liquid gets on this area, the cords close, causing the baby to make a noise that sounds like a squealing pig. The baby may turn red and arch their back while clearing the liquid. Then when all is clear, the baby will resume breathing and look fine. When a baby does this, any parent is going to pick their child up and tend to them. Rest assured however, that if this happens when you are not right there, that the child can clear the liquid on their own.

10. Goopy Eyes:

Babies start making more tears to lubricate their eyes around 10-14 days. There is a small drain (or duct) that runs from the middle corner of the lower eyelid to the nose. This is why a person's nose runs when they cry. Since everything is small in newborns, the duct that drains the tears is often narrowed or not fully developed. As a result, the normal tear production has nowhere to drain. Sometimes this results in an eye that drips the occasional tear. Other times, when the baby sleeps, the tears evaporate, leaving behind a yellowish, sticky residue. So long as the eye itself is not red, this is not an infection and is normal. See my other handout of "The Goopy Eye in Newborns" for details on how to manage this.

So that's my "Top 10 list" of newborn questions. Of course other things come up all the time but I wanted to summarize the most common questions about normal things that frequently occur. Don't hesitate to call for questions or concerns.

--Be Well

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