

Night-waking of infants and toddlers

Night-waking of infants and toddlers is a common concern for parents. When supporting parents with these concerns, it is important to appreciate what is normal so parents can have a clear idea of the wide range of normal infants' sleep patterns.

Resources

Breastfeeding Management in Australia, Brodribb, W. (ed) 2019, 5th ed. Australian Breastfeeding Association, Victoria.

Breastfeeding: and sleep booklet, Australian Breastfeeding Association

Breastfeeding: and crying babies booklet, Australian Breastfeeding Association



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Here are some facts about infant sleep:

- Most infants require parental assistance to go to sleep during at least the first year of life.
- Breastfed infants and infants in sleeping arrangements that allow sensory exchanges between the caregiver and infant are more likely to wake parents at night at 12 weeks and 6 months. However, there is no difference in overall length of sleep between breastfed and formula-fed infants.
- Mothers who are exclusively breastfeeding are likely to get more sleep than mothers who supplement their infants in the evenings.
- There is significant variability in the sleep needs/patterns between different infants. Even for one infant the amount of sleep can vary substantially from day to day.
- Infants between 0–2 months sleep between 11–18 hours a day and 3–5 month old infants sleep between 11–16 hours a day.
- No significant differences in 24-hour sleep duration exist between 3–5 month and 6–8-month-old infants.
- The daytime length of sleep gradually decreases while night-time sleep gradually increases as does the longest sleep episode.
- Night-waking is normal rather than 'bad' infant behaviour. Many infants wake at least once per night throughout the first year of life. Once the child is 2 years old, regular night-waking becomes much less common.

Some helpful strategies for parents concerned about their child's sleep include:

- Enquire about what the parent's main concern is. For example, are they worried that their infant may not be getting enough sleep or whether their infant's behaviour is appropriate? If so, reassurance that night-waking is common and normal and that their infant will outgrow it on their own may be all that is required.
- Discussing ways to minimise the length of wake times at night such as by having a simplified nappy-changing routine, having the infant sleep in the same room as the parent(s), low lights and little noise.
- Suggesting sleeping as much as possible when the infant does (including during the day).
- Encouraging the parents to accept all offers of support/practical assistance.
- Encouraging parents to seek support such as from an Australian Breastfeeding Association (ABA) breastfeeding counsellor via the 24 hour **Breastfeeding Helpline** or by attending a **local ABA group** meeting for face-to-face counselling and meeting with other parents with similar experiences.