Five Ways to Help Your Baby Get a Good Circadian Rhythm

It is no secret that newborns sleep a lot, about 10-18 hours a day, and wake consistently during the night. Newborn babies have a rhythm of their own, and bleary-eyed parents often struggle to keep up. In fact, a new baby sleeps whenever the need strikes, and there is not much you can do about it in the first few months. There is good news though. Babies can benefit from a sleep routine in the same way adults can. By getting in tune with their circadian rhythm, the body’s cellular time clock, babies develop a natural sleep-wake cycle that is more in line with night and day.

Here are some ways to help your baby get in the swing of things:

1. **Start Early**
Develop a consistent sleep-wake cycle while you are still pregnant. In the womb, a fetus already responds to signals of day and night. Fetal receptors for hormones like melatonin and dopamine allow those chemical messages to be received from the placenta, syncing the fetus’s circadian rhythm with the mother’s. Fetal rhythm is also determined by the mother’s feeding and resting schedule. Establishing regular meal times and sleep times is a good idea for everyone as rhythmic food ingestion affects the release of certain hormones which regulate our biological clocks.

2. **Create a routine for you and the baby**
Once the baby arrives, develop a consistent day and night time routine right off the bat--for you and the baby. Sometimes babies do not get enough sunlight in the early months to help them differentiate between day and night, which can lead to them getting the two mixed up. Aim to spend a bit of time outdoors, like a morning walk or at least some daily exposure to sunlight through a large window. Also plan on a regular end to the day at about the same time each evening. Once a baby’s sleep-wake rhythm is set, she will be sleeping her longest stretch at night.

3. **Nurse the baby at night**
Consider nursing your newborn for at least the first few months. Why? Night time breast milk has melatonin in it. Babies drinking formula miss out on this crucial hormone as do babies who drink breast milk at night that was pumped during the day. Right around three months, a baby’s own melatonin production increases to a level significant enough to regulate the sleep-wake cycle.

4. **Settle down before bedtime**
Activity and light levels can affect the way a newborn’s body perceives time. Settle things down in the evening to set the stage for sleep. Avoid the urge to walk around tidying up or get other things done while holding a sleeping baby. This can be especially tempting if you are wearing your baby in a baby carrier. The level of light in your home matters as well. It is common for parents to hold a sleeping baby in the evening with all of the lights still on. Moms and dads may even like to hold the baby while relaxing in front of the TV or catching up on email. It is better to limit the baby’s exposure to artificial light after sunset especially in the hour or two before bedtime as these kinds of
lights, including lights from a flickering TV screen or computer monitor, can affect baby's developing circadian rhythm. Instead, dim the lights, get quiet, swaddle the baby, or introduce other rituals that signal bedtime like singing, listening to calming music or playing a sound machine. Use an amber bulb in your night-light. White light from the newer LED bulbs contains some blue light as does the light from an iPhone. Blue light can suppress melatonin levels and confuse the circadian rhythm of both adults and babies.

5. Avoid stressors
Attend to the baby's needs and avoid letting her cry. Crying leads to stress and the release of stress hormones like cortisol, which wipe out the effects of melatonin. This makes it more difficult for the baby to return to sleep and to establish a healthy sleep pattern.

Proper sleep is essential for a growing baby to thrive, and getting logged into a 24-hour schedule is a good move for parents and baby alike. These tips can help encourage and stabilize a baby's circadian rhythm. Every baby is different, of course, and you can't rush natural development. Although sleeping an 8 hour stretch without waking may take as long as a year or more, establishing a basic circadian rhythm early can help pave the way for healthy sleep habits down the road.

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