

Sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic

Sleep for parents and babies



Becoming a parent for the first-time, or adding to your family, can be tiring and stressful at the best of times. Sleep is disrupted for most new parents for *at least* the first 6-12 months. The current COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic means we are all experiencing changes and restrictions and these can impact family sleep even more than we would normally expect.

Prioritise your own sleep

Sleep boosts your ability to cope with uncertainty, anxiety and worries. It also helps keep your immune system strong which is important in case you are exposed to this or other viruses (like colds and the flu). Good sleep will also help keep up your energy levels needed to care for your baby, yourself (and maybe others). Even though you might be getting about the same amount of sleep as before baby, it is likely to be broken up by feeding and other baby care. This means it doesn't feel as refreshing. If possible, try and get long chunks of sleep, so go to bed at night earlier than you normally would if you think baby is down for a long stretch. See if you can sleep-in in the morning. This is not lazy – it is an important way to look after your health. It is one way you can have some control at a time when a lot feels out of our control.

Bright light

Being exposed to bright light every day is really important for helping us sleep well and it also helps boost our mood. Ideally, get into bright light (from outside) for 20-30 minutes every morning. Even better, combine this with some activity like a walk, hanging out washing or pottering in the garden. If the weather is not good, try having a cuppa or breakfast near your brightest windows. Having you and baby near morning bright light will help set both of your bodies' biological clocks. Our biological clocks affect how well and when we sleep and bright light in the morning can help babies sleep development so that they start to for sleep longer stretches at night. Bright light also helps us feel more positive. At night we need the opposite. Dim, or have only a few lights on in the evening and the lowest lighting possible during the night for feeding or baby care.

Safety: *Baby's eyes are much more sensitive to bright light than adults. It is important to protect their eyes and their skin, especially when outside, even if it doesn't seem very sunny. Use hats, clothing and pram covers when outdoors.*

Whānau and friends

Being at home with a baby can be lonely sometimes especially if it is not easy to get out and about, or, as is happening during the Level 3/4 pandemic restrictions, you cannot visit whānau, friends or groups. Staying in touch by phone, social media and video calling is essential for new parents right now. Social support helps us feel better, can reduce stress and anxiety and helps our sleep. You might need to limit contact with some people if you feel more stressed and anxious after talking with them. Once again, prioritise your sleep and health at this time when you need to be as calm and rested as possible for your family (which includes you!).

Rhythms

It can be hard to have routines with a new baby, and even harder just now with other changes that might have happened in your house, such as changes to who lives there or visits, when people are coming and going for work or fitting work around family. Our minds and bodies like predictability, and keeping rhythms to things like when we eat, activity/exercise and even when we do daily tasks like shower helps increase a sense of certainty during uncertain times. Keeping a rhythm to our activities also helps our biological clock keep track of time and this helps keep our sleep and our mood stable.

Infant sleep

Sleep changes the most it ever will during our first year of life. You may notice your baby or babies' sleep changing in various ways during these ongoing weeks of restrictions. Try not to overthink what is happening, why it is happening or what you "should" be doing to get your baby to sleep "better". The more relaxed you are towards your baby's sleep, the more likely they will move through their natural changes and eventually progress towards something that works for all. Two helpful sayings to keep in mind are: "this too will pass" and "it's just a phase". Do what it takes to get sleep in your household. You can begin to address any habits you think are unhelpful once we get back into more usual life, by which time of course, your baby will be older.



Safe sleep

Remember to provide a safe sleep place for your baby for every sleep. This includes: having baby in their own bed or in a wahakura or Pepi-Pod® in your bed; placing baby on their back with their face clear of any bedding or toys; not having a baby in your bed space if anyone else in the bed is a smoker, has been drinking alcohol or using any other medication or drugs which alter thinking, mood or sleep; and not sleeping with baby on the sofa. See our website for some links to other sources of great information about safe sleep for your baby.

At a time when many things are out of our control, taking care of our sleep health will help us to cope now and make our transition back to less restricted living easier when that time comes.

See our website for links to other helpful sleep health resources and more information sheets about sleep for you and your whānau www.sleepwake.ac.nz.



Created by the Sleep/Wake Research Centre, Massey University, New Zealand.
Please circulate freely giving credit for the text to our team. Thank you.