

States Of The Newborn

Deep Asleep- A baby who is in deep sleep is very still with quiet breathing, hard to rouse, and does not exhibit signs of REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. Many parents find the “limp arm” test to be very effective to determine if baby is deeply asleep yet. Gently raise your baby’s arm, and upon release if the arm flops right down, but does not disturb the baby, it is a reliable sign that baby is in deep sleep.

Active Sleep- Also known as “light sleep” this is the period when a newborn has dozed off, but is not yet deeply asleep. It is characterized by fluttery eye movements (REM), mouthing and sucking motions, somewhat sporadic breathing, and a literally more active state of sleep. Your baby may move, resist when you attempt to move them, and grimace or make other facial movements. The majority of your baby’s sleep is done in active sleep mode.

Drowsy- The state between asleep and awake, it is very similar in newborns as it is in others. Your baby may drift in and out of sleep, stretch, yawn, and make small noises.

Quiet Alert- This state is characterized by baby being alert with steady breathing, interested in their surroundings, and is extremely open to interaction, yet remains calm and somewhat still. Many of the approach cues can be seen during both quiet and active alert, but feeding cues may be especially observable during quiet alert as it is an ideal time for a baby to nurse.

Active Alert- If quiet alert is the ideal time for feeding, active alert is the ideal time for play! Wide-eyed attention is given as the newborn takes in stimulation from the various senses. Legs and arms may be more active, and breathing rates increase as excitement may grow into agitation. In a world where everything is brand new, it is easy to understand why a newborn may become overstimulated. By learning to identify your newborn’s avoidance cues you can help bring them back to a calmer state when overstimulation sets in.

Crying- The final state is crying, and all babies use it to communicate their needs when their other cues are not noticed. Some infants cycle through their states very quickly, and crying is normal. It just means that your baby is overstimulated and needs comfort to help reorganize themselves. Sometimes feeding cues have been missed, and your baby needs to be calmed so they can eat. Other times your baby is tired and needs to be calmed so they may sleep. By watching for your baby’s avoidance and approach cues you will soon learn to decipher exactly what your baby needs based on their behaviors.



Infant states from L-R: Active Sleep, Drowsy, Quiet Alert, Active Alert, and Crying

If you need reassurance or help remember that there are numerous resources available to you. It takes a village!

Best,

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Another way of connecting to your baby is being aware of their cues and what they mean. The cues of a newborn can be divided into two main categories: approach cues and avoidance cues.

Approach Cues- A lot of the feeding cues are also approach cues: sucking on their hands, bringing the hands to the face, rooting, tongue thrusting, mouthing behaviors, and smacking their lips to name a few. Other cues that show your baby is looking for interaction are making eye contact, cooing and making other noises, having relaxed arms and legs that naturally may curl up toward the body, and clasp their hands and/or feet. These behaviors are often seen during the quiet alert and active alert stages. The presence of these actions are a great sign that your baby is ready and willing to interact with you! When your baby is ready to eat they will display feeding cues, and if baby is not hungry this is an excellent time to interact, play, and bond with your baby.



Avoidance Cues- The term “avoidance cue” can be a little off-putting or confusing for some parents, so another way to think of these behaviors are as overstimulated behaviors. When your baby avoids eye contact, rigidly holds their body parts (such as splayed fingers, arched back, or fully extended arms and/or legs), or frowns it is a sign that they may need some comforting that is not too stimulating to them. For some infants this is achieved by simply being



comfortable and able to withdraw into themselves. An infant that becomes agitated may need help to calm themselves. Some techniques you can try to help soothe your baby are to hold them in a comfortable position that does not create more stimulation such as against your chest, or with their head resting on your shoulder, and sway or rock. Many parents will naturally follow their instinct to “shush” the baby at this point, and that is a good way of helping your baby to reorganize too. A newborn’s nervous system can be sensitive, and when in a state that isn’t conducive to the amount of stimulation they need they may fuss or cry, but with a few tried and true techniques you can detect these avoidance cues and calm your baby back into a more relaxed state! Not only is it important to respond to your agitated newborn to soothe them, but to also strengthen the bond between you, so that your newborn will learn to trust that their needs will always been attended to. Some other normal newborn behaviors that are considered avoidance cues are spitting up, gagging, hiccuping, sneezing, yawning, coughing, the startle reflex, and grunting/straining during a bowel movement. Once again, these are little signs that your baby is not in the mood for a lot of interaction or stimulation.

TL;DR: Hands are the easiest indicator of what’s going on with baby!

Tight fists=I’m hungry! Tightly splayed fingers (think baby high five)=I’m focused on what I’m doing, don’t interrupt me! Relaxed, open hands=Full belly, happy baby!