

What's Normal for a Newborn?

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Your baby's head may look misshapen and elongated, a result of the "molding" that goes on as the baby makes it way through the birth canal. You may have to wait a day or two for the baby's head to become a more round shape. And sometimes there may be some swelling of the head -- especially if a vacuum extractor was used to get your baby out.

Your baby's face may be swollen and puffy too with a flattened nose and ears pressed down to the head. Don't be alarmed though. This will usually subside in just a few days. If your labor is unusually fast, the baby may have facial bruising, which will also subside.

The soft spot (known as the fontanel) is the diamond shaped area just above the hairline, where the baby's skull bones have not yet fused together. If you see a beating pulse there, don't be alarmed. Although it seems vulnerable, the soft spot is protected by a tough membrane that can be rubbed or gently washed.

Nearly all fair-skinned babies are born with blue or gray eyes, which may gradually change color over the first 12 months. Darker-skinned babies most often are born with brown or darker eyes, which usually stay that color.

Dark-haired babies usually stay that way, but blonds at birth may have their tresses darken.

Infants breathe primarily through their noses; this leaves their mouths free for nursing. They take an average of 30 to 50 breaths per minute.

The pulse of a newborn is fast, ranging from 100 to 170 beats per minute when awake, 70 to 80 when sleeping deeply. After a baby is six months old, the waking heart rate slows to 90 to 140 beats per minute.

Breasts and genitals may be slightly enlarged in both boys and girls, due to the influence of pregnancy hormones that have crossed the placenta. This swelling resolves within a week after birth.

Hands and feet often look mottled or slightly blue, and you may see white or red blotches on the body due to the baby's immature circulatory system and unstable temperature. If you're concerned about your baby's circulation, check the inside of the bottom lip-if that's blue, talk to your pediatrician.

Dry skin is normal for a newborn. Slathering on moisturizer won't help because some of the outer layers of a baby's skin dries up and flakes off naturally in the first couple of weeks.

On average, birth weights range from five pounds five ounces to eight pounds. Most of an infant's body weight is water, so vomiting and diarrhea can quickly lead to dehydration and weight loss.

Legs may look bowed due to cramped conditions in the uterus. As muscles strengthen and lengthen, legs will straighten themselves out.

BABY'S BIRTHMARKS

There are several different types of birthmarks:

"Stork bites" are flat, pink patches that are collections of blood vessels under the skin. They usually crop up on or around the forehead, nape of the neck, nose or eyelids. They are normal but take about a year to fade.

Strawberry marks first appear as tiny red dots and may increase in size up until the end of the first year. They usually disappear by five years of age.

Mongolian spots are blue-toned and are found on the lower backs of babies with dark skin tones (such as African Americans, Asians and some Mediterraneans). These eventually fade. Some birthmarks, however, are permanent.

IS BABY GETTING ENOUGH BREAST MILK?

During the first couple of weeks, you may wonder if your baby's getting enough milk, especially if he wants to nurse all the time or is fussy after feedings. Once the first sleepy day or two have passed, your baby should seem to be hungry all the time. And he probably is, since breast milk is digested within a couple of hours of consumption. Most newborns want to nurse eight to 15 times a day after the first three to four days of life. Feed your baby as often as he needs it. Schedules have no place in your routine while you're getting breastfeeding under way. Unfortunately, weighing the baby will probably not reassure you, since newborns normally lose 5 to 10 percent of their birthweight and most take two weeks to regain it. Nonetheless, there are signs that he may not be receiving enough. These include: The baby stops feeding after 10 minutes or less, you rarely hear him swallow, your breasts don't feel softer after nursing, he wets fewer than six diapers in a 24-hour period after the five days following birth, or he's not having a bowel movement at least once a day. If you're concerned about any of these signs, call your pediatrician or a breastfeeding consultant.