

Infant development: Birth to 3 months

Infant development begins at birth. Consider major infant development milestones from birth to 3 months — and know what to do when something's not right.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

A lot happens during your baby's first three months. Most babies reach certain milestones at similar ages, but infant development isn't an exact science. Expect your baby to grow and develop at his or her own pace. As you get to know your baby, consider these general infant development milestones.

What to expect

At first, caring for your baby might feel like an endless cycle of feeding, diapering and soothing. But soon, signs of your baby's growth and development will emerge.

Motor skills. Your newborn's head will be wobbly at first. But soon your baby will be able to lift his or her head and turn it from one side to the other while lying on his or her stomach. Your baby's stretching and kicking are likely to get more vigorous. If you offer a toy, your baby might grasp it and hold on tight for a few moments.

Hearing. Within a few weeks, your baby might respond to sounds by getting quiet or smiling. Expect your baby to respond to the sound of your voice.

Vision. Your baby will probably focus on your face during feedings. Soon your baby might begin to examine more-complex designs, along with various colors, sizes and shapes. You might notice your baby studying his or her hands and feet. By age 3 months, your baby might be easily distracted by an interesting sight or sound.

Communication. Newborns are sensitive to the way you hold, rock and feed them. By age 2 months, your baby might smile on purpose, blow bubbles and coo when you talk or gently play together. Your baby might even mimic your facial expressions. Soon your baby might reach for you when he or she needs attention, security or comfort.

Promoting your baby's development

Your relationship with your child is the foundation of his or her healthy development. Trust your ability to meet your baby's needs. You can:

Hold your baby. Gentle caresses and tender kisses can help your newborn feel safe, secure and loved. Hold and rock your baby. Allow him or her to study your face. Let your baby grasp your little finger and touch your face.

Speak freely. Simple conversation lays the groundwork for language development, even before your baby can understand a word. Ask questions and respond to your baby's coos and gurgles. Describe what you see, hear and smell around the house, outdoors, and when you're out and about. Use simple words

that apply to your baby's everyday life. Remember that your tone of voice communicates ideas and emotions as well.

Change positions. Hold your baby facing outward. With close supervision, place your baby on his or her tummy to play. Hold a colorful toy or make an interesting noise to encourage your baby to pick up his or her head. Many newborns get fussy or frustrated on their tummies, so keep these sessions brief at first — just a few minutes at a time. If drowsiness sets in, place your baby on his or her back to sleep.

Respond quickly to tears. For most newborns, crying spells peak about six weeks after birth and then gradually decline. Whether your baby needs a diaper change, feeding session or simply warm contact, respond quickly. Your attention will help build a strong bond with your baby — and the confidence he or she will need to settle down without your help one day.

When something's not right

Your baby might reach some developmental milestones ahead of schedule and lag behind a bit on others. This is perfectly normal. There's typically no cause for concern. It's a good idea to be aware of the warning signs, however. Consult your baby's doctor if you're concerned about your baby's development or you notice any red flags by age 3 months:

- Hasn't shown any improvement in head control
- Doesn't respond to sounds or visual cues, such as loud noises or bright lights
- Doesn't smile at people or the sound of your voice
- Doesn't follow moving objects with his or her eyes
- Doesn't notice his or her hands
- Doesn't grasp and hold objects

Remember that every baby is unique — but your instincts are important, too. The earlier a problem is detected, the earlier it can be treated.

Infant development: Milestones from 4 to 6 months

From ages 4 to 6 months, your baby becomes more aware of his or her surroundings. Infant development milestones include rolling over, clapping hands and babbling.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

The newborn days are behind you. As your baby becomes more alert and mobile, each day will bring exciting new adventures. Every experience — from cuddling before nap time to listening to a sibling's chatter — will help your baby learn more about the world.

Expect your baby to grow and develop at his or her own unique pace. Consider these general infant development milestones as your baby's strengths and preferences begin to emerge.

What to expect

As your baby becomes more aware of the surrounding world, he or she will begin exploring. From ages 4 to 6 months, your baby is likely to enjoy:

Evolving motor skills. Your baby's arms and legs probably wiggle and kick more purposefully now. Soon you might notice your baby rocking on his or her stomach and eventually rolling over. As your baby gains muscle strength, he or she will have better head control. Most babies this age raise their heads when lying facedown. They might even try to push themselves up or bear weight on their legs. By age 6 months, many babies begin sitting alone. Creeping or crawling typically follows.

Improving hand-eye coordination. Your baby will probably grasp your finger, a rattle or a soft object. Anything within reach is likely to end up in your baby's mouth. You might notice your baby pulling objects closer with a raking motion of the hands. Soon your baby might start transferring objects from one hand to the other.

Clearer vision. Your baby will begin to distinguish between strange and familiar faces. You might notice your baby concentrating on a toy, studying fingers and toes, or staring at his or her reflection. Most babies this age turn their heads toward bright colors. If you roll a ball across the floor, your baby will probably turn his or her head to follow the action.

Babbling and other new sounds. Babies this age often begin to babble, squeal, gurgle and laugh. Your baby might respond to and imitate your facial expressions and sounds. He or she might babble and then pause, waiting for you to respond. As your baby's memory and attention span increase, he or she will begin to pick out the components of your speech and hear the way words form sentences. Your baby might even recognize his or her name. You might notice changes in inflection or tone as your baby babbles and coos.

Promoting your baby's development

At this age, learning and play are inseparable. It doesn't take expensive educational toys or intense effort, however, to capture your baby's attention. To promote infant development:

Talk to your baby. Your baby is probably too young to understand specific words, but easy conversation can lay the groundwork for language development. Your tone of voice can communicate ideas and emotions as well. Ask questions and respond to your baby's coos and gurgles. Describe what you see, hear and smell around the house, outdoors, and when you're out and about. Use simple words that apply to your baby's everyday life.

Change positions. Lay your baby on his or her tummy for a few minutes, as long as an attentive adult supervises. Hold a colorful toy or make a noise to encourage your baby to pick up his or her head or practice rolling over. Hold your baby's hands while he or she is lying down and say, "Are you ready to stand up? Here we go!" Count to three as you gently pull your baby to a standing position. When your baby's ready, try a sitting position. Hold your baby or use pillows for support.

Offer simple toys. Babies this age often enjoy colorful toys, especially those that make sounds. Try a musical toy, a small rattle with a handle, a soft doll or a sturdy book. Some household items, such as

plastic bowls and measuring cups, might be a hit as well. Avoid toys with small parts. To help your baby focus, put out only one or two toys at a time. Place one toy slightly out of reach to encourage your baby to stretch and creep. Shake a rattle behind your baby's head and let him or her turn and grab it. Let your baby watch his or her movements in a mirror.

Read to your baby. Your baby won't grasp the plot, but that's OK. Reading to a baby promotes speech and thought development. Your baby will soak in your words and might even mimic the sounds you make. Start with books featuring large, brightly colored pictures. Describe what's happening on each page. Point to and name common objects.

Play favorite games. Cover your face with your hands, then remove your hands and say, "Peekaboo, I see you!" Play patty-cake. Ask, "Where are your toes?" Then touch your child's toes and say, "Here are your toes!" Hide one of your baby's toys with the corner of a blanket and encourage him or her to find it.

Take time to cuddle. Balance stimulation with plenty of quiet time. Gentle caresses and tender kisses can help your baby feel safe, secure and loved. When you hold or rock your baby, talk quietly or sing lullabies or other soothing songs.

Turn on the tunes. Music can help soothe, entertain and teach your baby. Try calming lullabies, upbeat children's songs, classical music or your own favorites.

Let your baby set the pace. When your baby turns away, closes his or her eyes, or gets fussy, take a break. Even babies need space. Get to know your baby's unique personality, temperament, likes and dislikes. Responding to your baby's needs will help you continue to build your baby's trust in you.

When something's not right

Your baby might reach some developmental milestones ahead of schedule and lag behind a bit on others. This is normal, and usually no cause for concern. It's a good idea, however, to be aware of the signs or symptoms of a problem.

Consult your baby's doctor if you're concerned about your baby's development or your baby:

- Has stiff or tight muscles
- Seems extremely floppy
- Reaches with only one hand
- Hasn't shown any improvement in head control
- Doesn't respond to sounds or visual cues, such as loud noises or bright lights
- Doesn't reach for objects or put objects in his or her mouth
- Doesn't attempt to roll over or sit
- Has an eye or eyes that consistently turn in or out
- Doesn't laugh or squeal

Trust your instincts. The earlier a problem is detected, the earlier it can be treated. Above all, delight in your baby's discoveries and abilities.