

## Cluster Feeding and Fussy Evenings ... *My baby nurses and fusses all evening! What's wrong?*

**It is very common for babies to be fussy and breastfeed very often in the evenings, particularly in the early months.**

**Cluster feeding**, also called bunch feeding, is when babies space feedings closer together at certain times of the day and go longer between feedings at other times. This is very common, and often occurs in the evenings. It's often - but not always - followed by a longer sleep period than usual: baby may be "tanking up" before a long sleep. For example, your baby may nurse every hour (or even constantly) between 6 and 10 PM, then have a longish stretch of sleep at night - baby may even sleep all night.

Cluster feeding often coincides with your baby's **fussy time**. Baby will nurse a few minutes, pull off, fuss/cry, nurse a few minutes, pull off, fuss/cry... on and on... for hours. This can be VERY frustrating, and mom starts wondering if baby is getting enough milk, if something she is eating is bothering baby, if EVERYTHING she is doing is bothering baby... It can really ruin your confidence, particularly if there is someone else around asking the same questions (your mother, your husband, your mother-in-law).

**This behavior is NORMAL!** It has nothing to do with your breastmilk or your mothering. If baby is happy the rest of the day, and baby doesn't seem to be in pain (as with colic) during the fussy time - just keep trying to soothe your baby and don't beat yourself up about the cause. Let baby breastfeed as long and as often as he will. Recruit dad (or another helper) to bring you food/drink and fetch things (book/remote/phone/etc.) while you are nursing and holding baby. *Don't* give baby a bottle - supplementation will only tell your body to DECREASE milk supply at this time, and that will certainly not help matters. Also, keep in mind that formula-fed babies experience fussy periods in the evening, too -- fussy evenings are common for all young babies, no matter how they are fed.

### Why do babies fuss in the evening?

One frequently-heard explanation for baby's fussiness in the evenings is that milk volume tends to be lower in the evening due to the natural cycling of hormones throughout the day. However, Dr. Peter Hartmann, a breastfeeding researcher, has said that in the women he has studied, milk volume is *not* low at this time of day. Even if milk volume is lower in the evening, fat content is typically higher in the evening (particularly if baby is allowed to control this via cue feeding), so the amount of calories that baby is getting should not be significantly different. Milk flow *can* be slower in the evening, which may be frustrating for some babies.

Doctors often attribute evening fussiness to baby's immature nervous system (and the fussiness does end as baby gets older, usually by 3-4 months). However, Dr. Katherine Dettwyler (who does research on breastfeeding in traditional societies) states that babies in Mali, West Africa and other traditional societies don't have colic or late afternoon/evening fussiness. These babies are carried all day and usually nurse several times each hour.

So perhaps none of these explanations is a complete answer to baby's evening fussiness. For many babies, the fussy time seems to be characterized by a need to have small quantities of milk at frequent intervals, combined with lots of holding, cuddling and movement. Babies who are offered as much expressed milk or formula as they will take by bottle [note: this practice is not recommended and will decrease your milk supply!] often behave in *exactly* the same way in the evenings. Baby takes a small amount and dozes (and fusses), then a little more, and so on. Perhaps babies "remember" mom being very active during her pregnancy at these times, and want to be held, rocked, and nurtured constantly again.

**Perhaps babies simply need to breastfeed more often at this time -- rather than consume more milk.**

*My daughter had a fussy time every evening for a couple of months (yes, it does go away!). I spent weeks camped out on the end of the sofa with a constantly nursing and/or fussy baby every evening from about 6 to 10 PM.*

*With my son, we didn't have the luxury of being able to sit down. Alex was unhappy and crying unless he was upright and being walked around at this time of day (and sometimes this only helped him to be less unhappy). He would occasionally have a very fussy time during the day, too. Nursing rarely helped to calm his fussiness (unlike with my daughter), so I usually didn't have that tool to work with (though I always tried). His fussiness was such that I looked into other causes (such as food sensitivity), but we never determined any reason for it and he was all smiles the rest of the time. The fussiness gradually went away between 3 and 4 months, as is the norm, but the first few months were hard. Nowadays, the typical comment that I hear about him is "Is he always this happy?" So remember: this, too, will pass...*

## Soothing techniques for fussy babies

- **Wear baby** in a sling or baby carrier.  
This will free one or both hands for other tasks (fixing dinner, caring for other children) while you hold, soothe and nurse your baby.
- **Try a change of pace.**  
Let dad have some “baby time” while mom takes a shower or simply gets some time to herself to relax and regroup after a long day.
- **Go outside.**  
Relax baby (and mom too) with a walk, or just sit and enjoy the outdoors. Try this a little while *before* baby’s regular fussy time.
- **Soothe with sound.**  
Sing, hum, talk, shhh at the same volume as baby’s fussing, listen to music, or use ‘white noise.’ Try different types of sound, different styles of music and singers with different types of voices.
- **Soothe with rhythmic motion.**  
Walk, sway, bounce, dance, swing, or even try a car ride.
- **Soothe with touch.**  
Hold, bathe or massage baby. Get in a warm bath with baby.
- **Reduce stimulation.**  
Dim lights, reduce noise, swaddle baby.
- **Vary nursing positions.**  
Try side lying, lying on your back to nurse with baby tummy to tummy, etc.
- **Nurse in motion** (while rocking, swaying, walking, etc.).
- **Combine rhythmic motion with soothing sounds.**
- **Avoid scheduling**, even more so in the fussy evening hours.

### Helpful books

#### ***The Happiest Baby on the Block***

*The New Way to Calm Crying and Help Your Baby Sleep Longer*  
by Harvey Karp, MD

#### ***The Fussy Baby Book***

*Parenting Your High-Need Child From Birth to Age Five*  
by William Sears, MD and Martha Sears, RN