

Sleep tight

Becky Dickinson EXPLORES WHY SLEEP IS JUST AS IMPORTANT FOR PARENTS AS IT IS FOR BABIES – AND LOOKS AT WAYS TO GET MORE OF IT

The world is at last waking up to the fundamental importance of sleep. And for good reason: sleep is the single best thing we can do for our physical and mental wellbeing. In the quiet of the night, sleep strengthens the immune system and allows the mind to sort through memories, emotions and experiences so that we wake up feeling refreshed and recharged.

But getting enough sleep doesn't just make us feel better, it's fundamental to our health, too. Sleep helps to protect against numerous conditions, including: diabetes, cancer, obesity, Alzheimer's and cardiovascular disease, as well as depression and other mood disorders.

Yet a massive 67 per cent of us don't get the recommended seven to eight hours a night – and for new parents, that figure is even higher. Research suggests that the average parent loses more than a full month's sleep in the first year of having a baby. And of course, the added irony is that you've never been more tired!

Newborns sleep for around 17 hours a day (although not necessarily when you'd like them to!). For the first 48 hours of life, many babies barely even wake up. Lucy Shrimpton, founder of The Sleep Nanny and Sleep Expert at The Baby Show, says: "If I'd have known that nature gifts mothers with a post-birth rest period, I'd have made the most of it!" She advises others not to miss out, adding: "Be sure to rest and recover and indulge in some deep sleep during this time. Don't have lots of visitors until you've both had this recovery. It will stand you in good stead for the weeks ahead."

Unfortunately, babies arrive in the world with very little concept of day and night,

which can leave you feeling like you've got a persistent case of jet lag. "Getting your baby into a basic bedtime routine as early as two to three weeks is a great idea," says Lucy. "Simple steps like a wash, change clothes, milk feed, cuddle, song or poem and then down to sleep. When done in the same order at the same time every evening, this creates rhythmicity for a baby and cues that sleep time is coming."

However, just as babies need a 'bedtime' routine, so, too, do parents. This means winding down in the evening, rather than catching up on all the things you feel you should be doing. Turn off screens and phones at least an hour before going to bed as the blue light emitted from electronic devices suppresses melatonin production – the

For some parents, it's not just the disrupted sleep pattern that can make sleep hard to come by, but anxiety as well. But if you often feel too fraught to drift off, there are lots of things that can help – from breathing exercises and mindfulness apps like Headspace, to natural remedies. Even traditional sleep aids, like lavender, can be surprisingly effective. Dr Chris Etheridge, a chemist, medical herbalist and adviser to Puresseintiel says: "Scent is incredibly potent because it is the only sense which is linked directly to the limbic system – the part of our brain that activates our most fundamental behavioural and emotional responses." So when we inhale the aromatic molecules contained within essential oils, this activates chemical messengers, like

serotonin and endorphins, that help to relieve stress and promote better sleep.

In addition, you might want to up your magnesium intake. Known as 'nature's tranquilliser', magnesium is renowned for its soothing

effect on the nervous system. As well as being found in almonds, leafy greens, avocados and dark chocolate, it's also available in supplement form. Or you could have a soak in the bath with some magnesium-rich Epsom salt, as it's also absorbed through the skin.

If, however, you find yourself trapped in a cycle of anxiety and exhaustion, or you find yourself constantly checking that your baby is breathing while they're asleep, rather than trying to get to sleep yourself, then it's worth speaking to your GP or health visitor. And remember – although it can be hard to believe when you're struggling to remember what day of the week it is – the gruelling nights do come to an end. **1**

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hormone that makes us feel sleepy. And while the demands of parenthood can leave you in need of a pick-me-up, step away from the kettle! Caffeine has a half-life of around five hours, which is the length of time it takes the body to get rid of half the original amount. So if you have a cuppa in the evening, it will still be swirling around your system when you need to sleep.

While some postnatal sleep deprivation is inevitable, it's essential to make self-care a priority during this time. So forget the housework and put your feet up when you can, or even meditate for five minutes to help avoid burn-out. Remember, your baby needs you at your best.