Newborn Characteristics:
How Your Baby Will Look and Behave After Birth

As a newborn parent, you may have questions about your baby’s looks and behavior. Below are some common physical features and behaviors you may notice soon after birth.

Head and Hair

• Your baby’s head may appear too large for its body. The head is 1/4th of your baby’s total size. It is an average of 13 to 14 inches at birth.

• Your baby’s head may look out of shape. This is from molding of the skull bones during labor and birth. Swelling of the scalp or slight bleeding under the scalp can also give the head this appearance. This is temporary.

The head will become round and smooth in the next few weeks.

• Your baby’s fontanelles or “soft spots” are areas where the skull bones do not join. It allows your baby’s head to grow. However, the bones are held together by a tough membrane. The fontanel on top is diamond shaped and closes by 18 months. The fontanel on the back is shaped like a triangle and closes by 6 weeks of age.
• Your baby may be born with a full head of hair or none at all. It is common for babies to lose most of their first hair by 1 year of age.

Vision
• Your baby’s eye color depends on skin tone, blue-gray if fair-skinned or brown if dark-skinned.
• By 6 months to 1 year of age, your baby’s eye color will be permanent.
• When showing your baby objects, hold them 8 to 12 inches from their face. Hold your baby 12 inches from your face when you talk or play so that he or she can see you clearly.

Eyes
• When you newborn cries, you may not see tears. Tear ducts may not function for the first few weeks after birth.
• The “drops” or ointment placed in your baby’s eyes at birth may cause some discomfort or swelling. This goes away after the first few days after birth.
• You may notice your baby looks cross-eyed. A newborn’s eye muscles are weak at birth. Over the new few weeks, eye muscle strength will improve and your baby can better focus on objects.

Hearing
• Babies can hear loud and soft noises at birth. Loud noises may cause your baby to startle, while soft noises may help to calm your baby.
• Your baby quickly learns the difference in voice sounds. Your baby will turn its head to a familiar voice, especially mom’s and dad’s voice.

Taste and Smell
• Newborns can taste and smell at birth. Your baby will be able to taste formula or breast milk.
• Avoid heavy perfumes and do not smoke around your baby.
**Skin**

- At birth, your baby may have a thick cheese-like covering. This is called vernix caseosa. Vernix helps to protect your baby’s skin while in the uterus.
- Over your baby’s forehead, nose and cheeks, you may see “whiteheads” or milia. These are plugged immature oil glands that will go away in several weeks.
- Your baby may have soft downy hair that may cover its face and body. This is called lanugo and it will go away within a few weeks after birth.
- Your baby may have pale pink marks on the face and neck. There are called stork bites and will fade during childhood.
- You baby may have bluish-black marks on the lower back or bottom. These are called Mongolian spots and are more common on dark-skinned children. They will fade during childhood.
- A newborn’s skin is very sensitive to temperature changes. If your baby becomes too cold, the skin may appear blotchy with slightly bluish hands and feet. If overheated, a rash may develop.

**Chest and Breathing**

- Your baby’s breathing is not like your breathing. Babies take little breaths and use stomach muscles to help breathe. You may even notice short pauses between some breaths. The rate of breathing is 30 to 60 times a minute. This is because their heart rate is rapid at 120 to 160 times a minute.
- The breasts of boy and girl babies may look enlarged after birth. The hormones that cross the placenta during the last two weeks before birth cause the breasts to fill with milk. Do not squeeze the breasts. The enlarged breasts will go away in about 2 weeks.

**Abdomen**

- The abdomen may be round or stick out slightly. The stump of the umbilical cord is clamped. The cord will dry and fall off in 1 to 2 weeks. You may notice a small amount of bleeding.
• If there is redness around the umbilical cord or pus-like drainage, call your baby’s health care provider immediately.

Genitals
• You may notice some swelling around the genitals. Genitals are the sex organs you see outside the body. This happens because the hormones that cross the placenta before birth cause slight enlargement.
• The hormones in a girl may cause the baby to have white vaginal drainage. She may also have slight vaginal spotting. This is known as a false period.

Arms and Legs
After birth, your baby’s arms and legs may look bent and are held close to the body. Most newborn babies’ hands are in tight fists. Legs may appear bowed. The arms and legs may also appear too short for the body because of their bent appearance. This is temporary. By 3 to 4 months, the arms and legs stretch out. The hands will unfold and your baby will begin to reach for objects. As the legs grow longer and stronger, your baby will sit, crawl and stand.

Reflexes
Your baby will be born with many reflexes for survival and safety. These reflexes are important and help your health care provider determine if your baby has a healthy nervous system.
• Survival Reflexes:
  ▶ Sucking
  ▶ Swallowing
  ▶ Rooting – this is the reflex that occurs when the cheek or the corner of the mouth is stroked slightly.
• Safety Reflexes:
  ▶ Gag reflex – this is to prevent choking
  ▶ Cough – to get rid of mucus
- Tonic neck reflex – this is when your baby lies in a “fencing” position, also known as tonic neck reflex

- Moro reflex – this is when your baby will thrust out both arms when he or she is startled

- Grasp reflex – this is very strong at birth. If you place your finger in the palm of your baby’s hand, he or she will grasp very tightly.

**Behavior**

- Your newborn baby will probably spend a lot of time sleeping or eating. Your baby may be very alert and gaze at you, or be very quiet and drowsy right after birth.
During the next month, your baby will spend less time sleeping and more time awake. When sleeping, babies have two sleep states:
- Deep sleep – your baby remains still with little body movement.
- Light sleep – your baby has some body moment. Your baby may fuss briefly, make crying sounds, or even smile.

When awake, your baby’s behavior may range from alert to fussy. When the baby is quietly alert, this is the best time to feed, play and talk to your baby.

Crying is a response to unpleasant stimulation. Your baby needs to be calmed and held. Information about these different states will help you to know what your baby needs.

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.