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Health

Alternative, Natural Medicine For Babies

Five drug-free cures for colds, colic, constipation, and more
By *Maryl Davids Landau, Babytalk*

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Three-week-old Max Sprague had a hard tummy, severe gas, and explosive greenish poop -- despite the anti-gas drops his pediatrician had suggested. So his mom, Sara, of New York City, turned to an alternative remedy known as probiotics. She dabbed a probiotic powder -- called Baby's Jarro-Dophilus and designed for infants -- on her nipples before nursing. In 24 hours, the gas disappeared and Max's poop was a normal seedy, mustardlike consistency.

Sprague's experience isn't unique. Parents are increasingly asking their pediatricians about complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) practices such as aromatherapy, homeopathy, and probiotics -- and getting the green light. "This is a consumer-led revolution. Interest is coming from the families," says pediatrician Lawrence Rosen, M.D., vice-chair of the new American Academy of Pediatrics's (AAP) section on the field. Used in conjunction with traditional medicine and with careful guidance from your doctor, these safe and often effective drug-free alternatives can be a helpful and welcome addition to your baby's health care.

Probiotics

What it is: a form of "good" bacteria that creates balance in the digestive system, boosting your baby's immunity

For: diarrhea, colic, eczema

Why it works: "Nearly seventy percent of the human immune system is located in the digestive tract," says Chapel Hill, North Carolina, pediatrician Hilary McClafferty, M.D. "Compelling research has shown that probiotics significantly cut the duration and severity of infant diarrhea, which can cause dehydration," she notes. Some doctors recommend using probiotics every time a child is given antibiotics to restore the beneficial bugs the medicine eliminates and to control antibiotic-related diarrhea. Other small studies are finding that probiotics may also help with colic and eczema.

Probiotics can be found at pharmacies and health-food stores, but ask your baby's doctor to



Gregor Halenda

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recommend a brand (Florastor Kids, Lactinex, and Culturelle are popular) and how to administer it. A refrigerated supplement with a mixture of live bacteria, described on the label as having 5 billion to 10 billion CFUs of powdered probiotics, is most effective.

The safety quotient: Probiotics are well studied, so pediatricians often recommend them without hesitation.

Herbal Tea

What it is: an herbal remedy made from a plant's leaves, roots, stems, or flowers

For: colic, gastric distress

Why it works: Although most herbs are too strong and untested for infants (and some, such as star anise, can be downright dangerous), doctors often recommend chamomile or fennel tea for gas and colic. "Studies have confirmed that these two herb teas reduce crying time in colicky infants," says the AAP's Dr. Rosen. The usual advice: Steep one herb or a combination of both in hot water, then let it cool to lukewarm. Serve your baby one-ounce doses three to four times a day.

The safety quotient: Chamomile or fennel is fine (but stay away from all other herbs), as long as you don't give your baby too much tea, making him too full for those important feedings of breast milk or formula.

Homeopathy

What it is: a system of natural medicine recognized by the Food and Drug Administration. The nontoxic ingredients are all found in nature and used in minuscule amounts.

For: teething, colds, colic, bruises, allergies

Why it works: Homeopathy works on the premise that a natural substance that causes symptoms in its pure form will prod the body to heal itself when diluted extensively (similar to the way vaccines work). Homeopathic remedies performed as well as conventional drugs for respiratory illnesses -- and worked faster -- in an Austrian study last year of both adults and children.

Your doctor will likely recommend starting with prepackaged homeopathic remedies sold in drug- and health-food stores. Follow the dosage for babies exactly, crushing the pellets into a powder that you can slip into your child's mouth during feedings. For more complex conditions, some physicians may refer you to a trained homeopath for a customized remedy.

The safety quotient: "Homeopathy is particularly effective for babies because there are no side effects and it offers great remedies for the conditions babies often get," says Tim Fior, M.D., a Chicago family physician.

Aromatherapy

What it is: the use of scents for physical and psychological well-being

For: pain, congestion, sleep, headaches

Why it works: Aromatherapy is believed to activate emotional centers in the brain, creating a feeling of pleasure or a sense of calm. When some scents are inhaled into the lungs, they have a therapeutic effect (think of Vicks BabyRub). The National Association for Holistic Aromatherapy recommends matching scent to symptom: eucalyptus is helpful for congestion, peppermint for headaches, and ylang-ylang or lavender for relaxation and sleep. For little ones, a physician will usually suggest putting a few drops of a specific essential oil into the bath or on a handkerchief that's then placed in the nursery near the crib.

For babies who are fussy or in pain, however, any familiar scent may help to calm them. One recent study found that babies who had been exposed to vanillin (a synthetic form of vanilla) -- on a scarf in their crib or on their nursing mother's skin -- were about half as likely to cry when they smelled the scent again during a heel stick than babies who sniffed it for the first time just before the procedure. "The memory of a previous encounter with the smell, rather than the specific smell, seems to be what was important in calming the baby," says study coauthor Nathalie Goubet, Ph.D., of Pennsylvania's Gettysburg College.

The safety quotient: Fine when used properly, which means diluted and never applied directly to skin.

Acupuncture

What it is: the brief placement of thin needles in the skin; also done using acupressure beads

For: pain and accompanying nausea in babies with serious illness

Why it works: "Acupuncture leads to the release of endorphins, reducing the babies' need for medicines for nausea, vomiting, and pain," says Brenda Golianu, M.D., assistant professor of pain management at Stanford University School of Medicine in Palo Alto, California. Some babies don't even feel the very thin needles, which are in place for about ten minutes. "Many infants are actually calmed by the treatment," Dr. Golianu says.

The safety quotient: We know it sounds extreme, but evidence is good that acupuncture is helpful for some preemies and babies with serious illness or chronic or postsurgical pain. But first be sure to consult your doctor.

Meryl Davids Landau, health writer and mom of two, lives in Boca Raton, Florida.

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