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## **Amazing Newborns**

Babies are born with some remarkable abilities. Here are 10 to marvel at.

By Lisa Bendall

Cathy Nardi had cuddled young babies before, so she thought she knew what to expect when her first child, Aryana, was born. But the Montreal mom discovered that this wriggly, brilliant, beautiful infant absolutely took her breath away. Despite an exhausting labour and unplanned C-section, Nardi stayed awake that entire first night, staring at her daughter in awe. "I couldn't put her down. I just had to hold her and look at her sleep."

From Aryana's early smiles to the way her eyes lit up at the sight of her mother, the newborn never ceased to impress her mom and dad. "With everything she did," says Nardi, "I just kept saying to my husband, 'She came out of us. And look how amazing she is!'"

Babies are an everlasting source of wonder to parents and scientists alike, with their rich repertoire of sometimes surprising skills. While many of these inborn abilities can be linked to survival, that certainly doesn't diminish the magic when your baby is soothed by your familiar lullaby, or she finds a surefire way to attract your attention. Here are 10 astonishing newborn talents to marvel at:

### **1. Got Milk?**

Nourishment is a basic need and babies come out ready for action, with an incredibly strong sucking reflex. "Every mom is absolutely amazed by this," says Tracey Novoselnik, a midwife in Winnipeg. In her practice, she watches the effect this has on new mothers who put their babies to the breast immediately after labour and see them instinctively latch on. "I see how moms become rejuvenated after 30 hours of hell on wheels. They see that little face, they feel the skin to skin, and it's just like they've never gone through that labour. It's so worth it."

Remarkably, there's even evidence that babies recognize in the milk specific flavours that they encountered while still in the womb. So if you couldn't get enough of those extra-garlicky dill pickles while pregnant, chances are your breastfed baby won't be fazed if your after-delivery diet is just as full-flavoured.

### **2. Gripping Moments**

Touch your finger to a newborn's palm, and her hand will automatically curl around it. This grasping reflex is strong enough to pull baby to a sitting position – although it fades within a few weeks, so it isn't safe to experiment. Instead, take advantage of this reflex to feel a close connection with your infant. "There's nothing like having a baby putting his little tiny fingers around yours," says Novoselnik. "Touch allows babies to communicate." A bonding bonus: big brothers and sisters can also "hold hands" with their newest family member.

### **3. Sounds Familiar**

Soon after little James was born, his mother, Tania Hrebicek, noticed that her voice had a powerful effect on him. "I was always talking to him, and he seemed to calm down sooner in my arms than in someone else's," she says from her home in Edmonton.

Hrebicek had begun talking to her baby long before birth, and believes that has strengthened their ties. "It's very, very rewarding when he is soothed by me. It's an awesome feeling," she says.

The ability of newborn babies to recognize human voices and, in particular, very familiar ones is mind-boggling when you think about it. "Given how the sound would distort after travelling through the uterine fluid and walls, that's a fairly dramatic ability," says Mark Schmuckler, director of the University of Toronto's Laboratory for Infant Studies. "The internal workings of the body would mask the sounds too, since those are quite loud in utero." In fact, after birth, mom's and dad's voices don't sound anything like they did in the womb. Instead, astoundingly, the infant is probably recognizing his parents' particular speech rhythms and pitch changes.

#### **4. The Memory Game**

Small babies are mental giants. Their phenomenal ability to absorb and remember new information helps them learn about life in leaps and bounds. "Up until the late '80s, there was not much belief that infants could form memories at all," notes Ronald Barr, a professor of paediatrics at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, who specializes in infants. "Now there's lots of evidence that they do." Barr has tested the memory skills of babies just a few days old and has found not only that they remember specific spoken words they've heard before, but that a good feeding beforehand will actually facilitate this. "I have to admit, I still get a chill down my spine," says Barr. "It's absolutely fabulous."

#### **5. Stepping Out**

Here's a reflex many parents find fascinating: If you hold your baby under her arms, supporting her head, and let her feet touch a flat surface, she will appear to take a stroll. Of course, this stepping reflex isn't real walking. And baby's little limbs can't (and shouldn't) bear weight, so it's important to hold her securely. It's really interesting," says Barr, noting that although this reflex is present at birth, eventually voluntary stepping does take over. By the time baby is tottering toward her toys on her own, you can be sure she's in the driver's seat.

#### **6. Dream Weavers**

Young babies sleep a lot, but it seems there's much more happening at nap time than meets the eye. According to Schmuckler, newborns experience even more REM sleep than adults. Do they dream about their next meal? Their last diaper change? The Mickey Mouse mobile above their crib? That remains a mystery. "Infants do have experiences, and it could be that REM sleep makes use of those experiences just like adult sleep does," says Schmuckler.

#### **7. Spitting Image**

Anyone who's ever tried the frustrating exercise of dosing their newborn with a vitamin D dropper knows about the extrusion reflex. If baby tastes something unusual, her tiny tongue will shove it right back where it came from. "The vitamin D has a nice orange flavour which kids like – but when you give it to a newborn, most of it will come back out," says Novoselnik. Yet put a drop or two of breastmilk onto the tip of her tongue, and "she will lick and touch and taste."

This protective reflex is demonstrated in experiments when babies are tested with the bitter taste of quinine; they're sure to spit it out. Let's just say it's nature's way of

ensuring that your baby maintains a discriminating palate. Potential poisons get a thumbs down. But breastmilk? Bring it on!

### **8. They'll Cry If They Want To**

Although no newborn can summon mom to his side with actual speech, nature has equipped him with the consummate call-button: an ability to wail. Loudly. "I love crying," says Barr. "Its ability to get parental response is just fabulous." He's thrilled that science now backs parents who rush to pick up and comfort their howling infants. The old-school notion that being responsive will spoil them has been disproved, he says.

A full, lusty cry should be a welcome sound, Barr adds. "It's totally normal. It means the baby is very well organized and very energetic." If that's true, then James Hrebicek is an exemplary baby. "Those first few days, when I was exhausted, I would remind myself that crying was his way of telling me something," remembers his mom. "That would keep me from getting frustrated or upset."

### **9. Water Babies**

Until they're about six months old, newborns come equipped with a swimming reflex. If baby tumbles into water (definitely not something to try at home), he'll instantly hold his breath. He'll even do a pint-sized version of the front crawl.

"It's a fascinating reflex," says Barr. "That's the basis for people who advocate for infant swimming lessons, although it's not something you want to do without being very careful about it." This protective reflex is seen in other baby mammals like dolphins, who are born and raised in water. But since it disappears in humans, you should never submerge your baby on your own.

### **10. Face Value**

Don't ask how, but newborns seem to know there's something incredibly special about a human face. They would much rather look at a face than a turnip, for example. But the way this works is an mystery. "It's unclear whether they know that it's a face, or whether it's this weird thing that is still special," says Schmuckler.

Why is a preference for faces amazing? "I am convinced that it facilitates bonding between the parent and the newborn," says Novoselnik. "When you see a baby with her huge eyes, and then she makes that eye-to-eye contact, it brings out that gushy feeling in even the most stoic of adults. They're melting, and babbling at the baby." She adds, "It really does engage the parent."