

Supporting your baby's developmental care on the Neonatal Unit

Information for patients

Information to promote a calm and nurturing environment for your baby's brain development during the neonatal period.

Please speak to your nurse, doctor or member of the therapy team if you need any support to implement any of the below advice.

Reading your baby's cues

You are the experts in your baby - as you get to know each other you will start to notice what they like and dislike. Your baby will show you this through their behaviour – these are called 'cues'.

They may show you they are stressed by:

- Changing their colour (e.g. becoming red or pale)
- Extending their arms and legs
- Frowning
- Yawning / Sneezing
- Becoming quiet

They may show you they are coping:

- Having a stable heart rate or breathing
- Pink colouring
- Having their hands close to their face
- Being in a flexed position with feet together (like they would have been in the womb).

You can use your baby's cues to guide you on how they are coping with what is happening around them and what is happening to them. For example, knowing if they need some help or comfort during cares or a procedure.

Comforting your baby

You are the best person to comfort your baby, especially during medical procedures as they recognise your voice, smell and touch. This will help them to cope and feel calm and may reduce their pain or discomfort.

During procedures you can:

- Use your touch to comfort them.
- Give your baby 'hand hugs' – hold your baby gently, rest your hands on their head and their feet.
- Gently offer your baby a finger to hold.
- Talk to your baby in a calm voice during procedures if you are not able to touch them.
- Your baby may also have a 'Bertie' comfort aid – this can act as a comforting tool to provide still, deep touch for times when you are not available. Make sure to wear the 'Bertie' in your top before giving it to your baby so that it smells like you.
- As you are leaving the unit, you can place the 'Bertie' where you would usually place your hand, for ongoing comfort for your baby.



If you are not able to be there for a procedure, you can ask your nurse to offer your expressed breast milk (if available) to help to comfort your baby during procedures.

Completing cares with your baby

You can be involved in your baby's cares right at the start of their admission. If you do not feel ready yet, speak to your nurse or a member of the Occupational Therapy team and they will support you.

- You can prepare your baby for cares by talking to them and gently placing your hand on them before starting.
- If you are not yet ready to change baby's nappy, you can continue talk to your baby and place a hand on them while your baby's nurse changes their nappy.
- This will help your baby to feel calm and cope with being touched.



Positioning your baby

Whilst your baby is premature, due to their developing muscle tone, they will naturally rest in a position similar to photo 1 below; and will need support to maintain a 'tucked' position.

- Your baby will likely have a nest (similar to photo 2) around them in the incubator/cot to provide a boundary to support them in a flexed and tucked position.



Photo 1



Photo 2

- The nest can also help your baby to develop their muscle tone and feel comforted by giving your baby something to push and kick against.
- Ensure the nest is close to their body, helping them to stay in a tucked position with their head in the midline.
- Your baby may also have a fluidised pillow to help keep their head in the middle until they develop their head control, and it also helps to encourage their head shape to form appropriately.



Having skin-to-skin with your baby

There are many benefits of skin-to-skin for both you and your baby, including: improved responses to stress, encouraging stable heart rate and breathing, improved sleep, and positive bonding, increased milk supply for mothers and positive pre-feeding experiences.

- If your baby is medically ready for skin-to-skin, try this for at least one hour or more, every day if you can.
- To make sure you have time with your baby without having to get up or move, go to the toilet beforehand and have a drink of water.
- Then sit comfortably, lying back with your feet on a footstool. Use a hand-held mirror or your phone camera so you can see your baby's face more easily.
- If your baby is not yet ready for skin-to-skin, you can still provide positive touch by: giving them a 'hand hug', giving them your finger to grasp onto or placing your hands on their chest or head to provide still touch.



Feeding your baby

Depending on your baby's gestation, they may not be ready for oral feeds. However, there are things you can do to help your baby to develop positive pre-feeding experiences during this period.

- Complete their mouth care using your breast milk (if you are expressing) or sterile water. This will help to promote positive mouth experiences for your baby.
- If possible, while your baby is being fed through a tube in their nose, have skin-to-skin contact. Your baby will be comfortable and calm, allowing them to build a positive association with the feeling of milk in their stomach.
- If skin-to-skin contact is not possible, talk to your baby and gently rest your hand on them during a feed.
- If your baby is able to, let them suck on a dummy or your finger. This will comfort them and also help them to learn how to soothe themselves.



Your baby's sensory environment

Premature babies can find the Neonatal Unit very over-stimulating; they often have many procedures and are handled a lot because of the treatment and care they need. There are many things you can do to support your baby to have positive sensory experiences while they are with us:

Vision:

- Before 32 weeks gestation, the pupils of your baby's eyes will not constrict (get smaller) and their eyelids will be very thin. Your baby will have an incubator cover to protect them from direct and bright light.
- Try to keep their incubator as dark as possible so they are protected from harsh lighting.
- After 32 weeks' gestation you can start to introduce some natural daylight, but make sure the lighting is not bright or directly shining on your baby.
- The incubator does not need to be covered once they are 37 weeks as your baby will be ready for visual stimulation. Your face will be the best thing for them. They do not need toys or objects such as black and white cards.



Hearing:

- Let your baby get ready for your touch by always talking to them first before you touch or move them.
- Talking, reading and singing to your baby in a soothing, quiet voice can provide comfort to them, and will help your baby to recognise your voice.
- Watch their cues and how they respond to the noises around them. Look for quieter moments so it is easier for them to recognise your voice.

Touch:

- Premature babies are calmer with slow, firm touch instead of quick light touch.
- Provide hand hugs - hold your baby gently, and rest your hand on their head and their feet.
- Gently offer your baby a finger to hold.

Smell:

- Place a scent cloth that smells of you, under your baby's head. Your baby will recognise your smell, this provides a positive experience as well as helps to comfort them.
- You can also wear the top cover of a Bertie (discussed in comfort and pain management) before placing this on your baby.



Talking to your baby

- If your baby is in an incubator, sit close so they can see your face. Allow them to hold onto your finger and talk to them using a soft, gentle voice.
- As your baby approaches term age they will be quiet and alert for longer periods. This is a good time to talk to them.
- Position them where they can see your face and make eye contact. Watch their facial expressions and copy them (e.g. open your mouth, pull tongues), encouraging them to do the same.
- Talk, read and sing to your baby using a soft, gentle voice. You can also support their understanding by developing a routine (e.g. during nappy changing, feeding, bathing, comforting) and commenting on what is happening using simple, repetitive language.



Further information

Download the NHS 'Mum and Baby App' and search for the term 'premature' for more useful information and resources.

The app is will be available in both iOS and Android formats.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: **020 3299 3601**

Email: **kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net**

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: **01689 863252**

Email: **kch-tr.palspruh@nhs.net**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Communications and Interpreting telephone line on 020 3299 4826 or email **kch-tr.accessibility@nhs.net**

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