

Caring for Your Baby

Developmental care

When babies are premature or sick, they are very sensitive. Bright lights, loud noises, and even being touched can be overwhelming for these babies. It is very important to make their world calm and comforting.

To protect babies and support their healing and growth, we try to make the NICU as much like the womb as possible. This way of caring for a baby is called *developmental care*.

Developmental care for your baby means that we will:

- Place your baby in a comfortable and comforting position
- Keep lights low
- Speak softly

There are many ways you can help in your baby's developmental care. This handout gives guidelines to follow, both while you are in the NICU and after you take your baby home.

Find Out What Helps Comfort Your Baby

Your baby's stay in the NICU is the perfect time to learn the best way to care for your baby. The skills you learn here can help your baby keep growing and thriving after you go home.

While you are in the NICU, you will see that:

- Your baby's care team always handles your baby very gently.
- Your baby is calmer and more comfortable in some positions. While your baby is in the incubator, we may use a pillow called a Z-Flo to help your baby stay in a position that is most calming.



Your baby will be calmer and more comfortable in certain positions.



"I always felt guilty having my baby alone in a hospital room, but please know that your miracle needs time to grow. The best way they can do this is through sleep, just as they were doing in the womb."

-- Kylie's Mom

Sleep Helps Healing

Babies do most of their healing and growing while they sleep. Ideally, your premature baby will sleep a lot. We want to avoid waking your baby, if possible. As preterm babies near full term and grow stronger, they start to stay awake longer.

Read Your Baby's Cues

Cues are the signals your baby uses to show their feelings and how they are coping with the world around them.

Cues that your baby is overwhelmed:

- Changes in breathing and heart rate
- Looking away
- Turning different colors
- Yawns
- Startles
- Hiccups
- Putting a hand over the face or behind the ear
- Stretching the arm out, with fingers spread out (*finger splaying*)
- Gags or vomits

Cues that your baby is stable and ready to be engaged:

- Good skin coloring
- Steady breathing and heart rate
- Turns toward sounds
- Calm, alert gaze
- Moves their hand to their mouth
- Smooth and steady movements
- Brings hands together over the center of their body
- Makes eye contact

Focus on One Sense at a Time

Preemies and sick babies are very sensitive to sounds, lights, and touch. Too much sensory stimulation can affect their healing and growth. Always watch your baby's cues for signs of too much stimulation.

To avoid overwhelming your baby, try focusing on only one sense at the time. For example, instead of talking and touching at the same time, talk to your baby first, and then stop talking while you put your hands in the incubator.

Touch

Touch is the first sense to develop while a baby is still in the womb. It begins as early as 7 to 8 weeks of gestation. This is one reason a premature baby is very sensitive to touch.

Ask your baby's nurse to teach you how to use touch in a way that is best for your baby. Here are some tips:

- Keep your hands still when you touch your baby. Stroking or massaging can be too stimulating.
- Cup one hand behind your baby's head and the other hand on the bottom of the feet. Your baby may find this comforting, since it feels like the fetal position.
- Hold your baby skin-to-skin ("kangaroo care") as soon as you and your baby are ready for it. During kangaroo care, try putting your finger inside your baby's hand for your baby to hold. Do kangaroo care as often as you can.

Taste and Smell

Babies use their senses of taste and smell while they are still in the womb. In the NICU, your baby will use these senses to recognize you.

To help your baby get to know your smell:

- Do **not** wear perfumes or scented lotions when you visit the NICU.
- You may be able to place a cloth that smells like your breast milk in your baby's incubator. This smell is unique to you. It can help your baby connect and bond with you. Ask your nurse if this is something you can do.

Resources: Hand to Hold Resource Library documents, including *What Does That Mean*, and NANN's Baby Steps to Home handout *Developmental Care: Information for Parents*

