

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS, PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND CARERS

Non-nutritive sucking (NNS) on the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit



Some babies are unable to orally feed straight away due to being born early or being poorly at birth. It is important to provide positive experiences for these babies to enable them to have a successful feeding journey. This leaflet has been designed to explore the options that you have for offering non-nutritive sucking opportunities for your baby, no matter what your feeding preferences are.

What is non-nutritive sucking?

Non-nutritive sucking is the term used for when a baby sucks on something without receiving any nutrition. For example, sucking on a clean finger, a dummy or a recently expressed breast.

Dummy/finger/thumb sucking is different to the suck a baby uses to suck when feeding. Being able to suck on a dummy or finger does not necessarily mean that your baby is ready to start suck feeding, but it can have benefits in the development of their feeding. When babies are in the womb, they spend lots of time sucking their fingers in preparation for feeding.

Alternatives

Once your baby is stable enough, and if you are planning to breast/chest feed, your baby may be able to nuzzle at the breast instead of using a finger or dummy; this can be done as early as 32 weeks gestation. Your baby may also prefer to suck their fingers instead of a dummy if they are able to get their hand to their mouth.

Benefits of non-nutritive sucking

Evidence suggests that offering a dummy for short periods of non-nutritive sucking can:

- Help babies to settle and calm themselves so they use less energy, which may help them to grow a little faster, especially during painful procedures such as having their blood taken.
- Stimulate the stomach to make the juices which help your baby to digest and tolerate their feeds more easily, which helps them to grow.
- Support the development of normal sucking patterns (co-ordinate sucking and swallowing, which promotes earlier oral feeding).
- Decrease the length of hospital stay in preterm infants.

- Some research suggests that using a dummy when putting baby to sleep can reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome.
- Non-nutritive sucking may assist brain development and improve oxygen levels in infants receiving nasal ventilation, e.g., high flow, nasal cannula, and CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure).

When to offer a dummy/soother/pacifier

Your baby will show you if they would like to suck; you will notice them move their mouth/tongue and mimic sucking actions. Offering a dummy at the same times as giving a nasogastric tube feed will help stimulate digestion and your baby will begin to associate the sucking technique with receiving milk and their tummy feeling full.

How to offer a dummy/soother/pacifier

If you offer your baby a dummy, touch your baby so they know you are going to do something, ask them if they want their dummy, touch the dummy along the top lip and wait until they open their mouth before giving the dummy. Your baby will also tell you if they don't want to suck, for example if they spit out the dummy, pull a grimacing face, gag, close their lips or frown. Some babies prefer to suck their own fists or fingers rather than a dummy. The key is to follow your baby's lead and respond to their actions.

Your baby, your decision

Your wishes as parents/carers are very important, and it is your choice whether your baby has a dummy or not. Whatever your feeding intentions are, the team supporting you can discuss the different non-nutritive sucking options available to you and your baby.

Risks

As a parent/carer, you may feel worried that using a dummy may impact on establishing breast/chest feeding. The information and evidence surrounding this generally concerns healthy full-term babies and does not apply to premature or unwell babies that are not receiving oral feeds. There is no evidence to show that short term use of a dummy in a premature breastfed baby has any negative effect. Once your baby starts to take more feeds orally, usually around 33-34 weeks gestation, the use of a dummy should be limited so your baby has lots of opportunity to feed at the breast/chest. This will also help with your milk production. The sucking motion for breast/chest feeding is different to that of a dummy.

What soother should I use?

We can provide very tiny dummies for very tiny babies, but these should only be used until your baby is 1.75kg. Once they are this weight, we need to introduce a newborn size dummy, but you can save the small one for your memory box. We ask you to supply your own dummy if your baby can manage a newborn size.

Long term dummy use

This leaflet provides information on non-nutritive sucking whilst your baby is in hospital and is learning to feed. Please speak to your health visitor for further guidance on the use of a dummy as your baby grows and develops. If you have any more questions, please ask a member of staff.

For more information on non-nutritive sucking and the use of dummies in preterm infants, please see the Bliss website which can be found at:

<https://www.bliss.org.uk/parents/about-your-baby/feeding>

Contact details

Neonatal Unit

Telephone: 01623 622515, extension 3738.

Further sources of information

NHS Choices: www.nhs.uk/conditions

Our website: www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team (PET)

PET is available to help with any of your compliments, concerns or complaints, and will ensure a prompt and efficient service.

King's Mill Hospital: 01623 672222

Newark Hospital: 01636 685692

Email: sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net

If you would like this information in an alternative format, for example large print or easy read, or if you need help with communicating with us, for example because you use British Sign Language, please let us know. You can call the Patient Experience Team on 01623 672222 or email sfh-tr.PET@nhs.net.

This document is intended for information purposes only and should not replace advice that your relevant health professional would give you. External websites may be referred to in specific cases. Any external websites are provided for your information and convenience. We cannot accept responsibility for the information found on them.

If you require a full list of references for this leaflet (if relevant) please email sfh-tr.patientinformation@nhs.net or telephone 01623 622515, extension 6927.

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