

Information for Parents/Carers

Use of Dummies/Soothers/Pacifiers on the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

Non-nutritive sucking is the term used for when a baby sucks on something like a dummy or finger for comfort. Dummy/finger/thumb sucking is different to the suck babies use to suck a milk feed.

Benefits

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.
- Decrease the stress response if a baby has to have painful procedures e.g., blood test.
- Stimulate the stomach to make the juices that help the baby to digest and tolerate their feeds more easily, so they grow faster.
- Can speed up the maturity of a baby's sucking reflex so that they move onto oral feeding more quickly.

Developmental benefits

Sucking in particular is vital in the early development of the infant. Speech and language therapists often recommend non-nutritive sucking programmes for tube fed preterm infants to speed up the transition to oral feeding. Also, it may assist brain development and improve oxygen levels in infants receiving nasal ventilation e.g., vapotherm, nasal cannula oxygen and CPAP (Continuous Positive Airway Pressure).

When to offer a dummy

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 time as giving a tube feed will help stimulate digestion and your baby will begin to associate the sucking technique with receiving milk.

Your baby will also tell you if they don't want to suck in a variety of ways for example if they spit out the dummy, pull a grimacing face, gag, close their lips and frown. Some babies prefer to suck their own fists or fingers rather than a dummy. The key is to use your baby as the lead and respond to their actions.

Risks

As a parent, you may feel worried that using a dummy may have an impact on getting breast feeding established when your baby is ready to start oral feeds. The information surrounding this generally concerns healthy full-term babies and does not apply to premature or unwell term 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 effects provided there is ongoing support for breast feeding.

Alternatives

Once your baby is stable enough, if you are planning to breast feed them, your baby maybe able to nuzzle at the breast instead of using a dummy.

Your baby may also prefer to suck their fingers instead of a dummy, if they are able to get their hand to their mouth.

We can provide very tiny dummies for very tiny babies, but we ask you to supply your own if your baby can manage a newborn size.

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/tube-feeding>