



 THAMES VALLEY & WESSEX
NEONATAL NETWORK

COMFORTING YOUR BABY

Supporting in times of stress or pain

WHY PREMATURE OR UNWELL BABIES EXPERIENCE STRESS IN THE NEONATAL UNIT

Whilst every effort is made to ensure the neonatal unit is a healing environment, premature or unwell babies can experience different kinds of stress along their journey.

They may have acute stress and pain from having medical procedures. These could include heel pricks, being ventilated, ROP examinations, having suctioning or having an IV cannula inserted.

They can also experience stress from their sensory environment. Preterm and unwell babies can become easily overwhelmed by bright lights, noise, unexpected touch and fast or unsupported movement as their developing brain is not quite ready for these types of input.

Changing position, having their nappy changed or even having mouth cares can cause stress for sensitive premature or unwell babies, or those who have had multiple procedures during their day.

You play a very important part in these times for your baby. With help from your team, you can support your baby to minimise their stress and make them more comfortable.



IS MY BABY COMFORTABLE?

DISCOVERING YOUR BABY'S CUES

Every baby is unique so will express themselves in their own way, letting you know if they are comfortable or need support. When you spend time watching your baby closely whilst they sleep, when they are having nappy changes, or when having cuddles you will spot these cues.

Try to watch your baby's movement, their skin colour, and their facial expression for cues, not just the monitor - you may even know before the monitor if they need more support.

Premature babies' behaviour can sometimes be harder to read as they are more sensitive to their environment, and often respond more generally to stress through their body systems. This will get easier as they get bigger and you get to know each other.

Cues to look out for include:

breathing rate, heart rate, skin colour changes, muscle tone, body movements, facial expressions, cries, and responsiveness

SIGNS THAT YOUR BABY IS RELAXED AND CALM



If your baby is feeling OK, you might see that they:

- have regular, relaxed breathing
- have a relaxed body and face
- have their hands near their face or mouth
- sleep soundly
- move in a less jerky and more gentle way
- are still and alert and may look at you

SIGNS YOUR BABY MAY BE FEELING OVERWHELMED



Remember that their cues will become more obvious, predictable and easier to read as they get bigger and stronger.

When babies are uncomfortable, overwhelmed or stressed, they show this in their body language.

Your baby might:

- breathe faster or have a faster heart rate
- have a wrinkly forehead
- make jittery or jerky movements
- extend their arms or legs out straight
- splay their fingers or toes
- have mottled, pale or reddened skin
- change quickly from being alert to being drowsy or appear asleep
- be fussy, irritable or start crying
- hiccup, yawn, gape or gag

IDENTIFYING PAIN

Sometimes you may feel that something doesn't seem right with your baby and that they may be experiencing pain. Indications for pain are generally more acute and intense:

- they may cry or whimper, and be unable to settle
- they may be tense, with clenched fists, and may push their arms and legs straight out
- they may be overly fidgety, agitated or drowsy and limp
- their skin may be pale, flushed, mottled or sweaty
- they may excessively suck on their pacifier
- they may shut their eyes tightly, or have a very tense looking facial expression

You know your baby best, so we hope you can help us to notice if your baby is unusually uncomfortable and to take action. Please do talk with your nurse or support team and let them know your concerns. Your team can then assess your baby's signs with you and make a plan to make them more comfortable.

WAYS TO COMFORT YOUR BABY



As you get to know your baby, you will work out what strategies are most comforting for them. This takes time, but watching your baby's cues and responses, trying a few different strategies and observing their responses will help you figure this out together.

You can try a few of these suggestions with your baby to help them calm and settle:

- Holding your baby skin to skin (kangaroo care)
- Using your calm soft voice and reduce noise around them
- Dimming the light in your baby's incubator or cot with a cot canopy
- Slowing down the cares, nappy changes, movements and transfers out.
- Offering your baby your little finger to hold
- Giving your baby a 'hand hug' - Holding your baby within your still hands, tucking them up, holding their feet, cupping their head (see picture above)
- Positioning your baby snugly in their nest with their hands to their face, feet tucked up giving a feeling of containment
- Swaddling your baby with their hands near the face
- Offering them a dummy, with breastmilk (if they are not nil by mouth)
- Offering them a breastfeed if they are ready

Your baby's cues

Watching and observing

What does your baby look like when they are calm and comfortable?

Watching and observing

How does your baby tell you that they need support?

Strategies

What have you noticed that calms your baby in times of stress?

Preparing for procedures

How would like to be involved in supporting your baby in these times?