

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS, PARENTS, GUARDIANS AND CARERS

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



Non-nutritive sucking is the term used for when a baby sucks on something like a dummy or a clean finger for comfort. Dummy/finger/thumb sucking is different to the suck baby uses to suck when feeding, but it can have benefits in the development of their feeding. When babies are in utero, they spend lots of time sucking their fingers in preparation for feeding. Your wishes as parents/carers are very important and it is your choice whether your baby has a dummy or not, whatever your feeding plans are.

## 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 procedure, e.g., a blood test if you are not able to put your baby to the breast/chest.
- Stimulate the stomach to make the juices that help the baby to digest and tolerate their feeds more easily, so they grow faster.
- Speed up the maturity of a baby's sucking reflex so that they move onto oral feeds more quickly.
- Decrease the length of hospital stay in pre-term infants.

Some research suggests that using a dummy when putting baby to sleep can reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

## Developmental benefits

Sucking in particular is vital in the early development of baby. Using a dummy can help develop facial muscles in premature babies. Speech and language therapists often recommend a non-nutritive sucking programme for tube-fed preterm babies 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., 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.

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.

### **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, rub the dummy along the bottom 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.

### **Risks**

As a parent/carer, you may feel worried that using a dummy may have an impact on getting breastfeeding/chest feeding established when your baby is ready to start oral 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.

### **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 and 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.

If you have any more questions, please ask 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/parent/about-your-baby/feeding/tube/feeding>

## Contact details

Neonatal Unit

Telephone: 01623 622515, extension 3738.

## Further sources of information

NHS Choices: [www.nhs.uk/conditions](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions)

Our website: [www.sfh-tr.nhs.uk](http://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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto:sfh-tr.patientinformation@nhs.net) or telephone 01623 622515, extension 6927.

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