



The use of dummies in the neonatal unit



This information leaflet is designed to help you decide whether or not you want your baby to have a dummy while they are in the neonatal unit (NICU).

Breastfeeding has many health benefits for both mothers and babies. It is even more important for sick or premature babies, as it contains lots of ingredients that help the baby fight infections. The action of suckling at the breast and the ingredients in the breastmilk itself provide comfort for your baby.

However, babies admitted to the NICU are pre-term or sick and are often unable to feed normally. Because of this, some parents wish to offer their baby a dummy for comfort while the parents are not there, or if it is not possible to have the baby in skin contact (the best way of comforting a distressed newborn baby).

Why dummies can be of use in the neonatal unit (NICU)

Babies use a dummy for non-nutritive sucking and comfort.

Non-nutritive sucking is when a baby sucks without getting any milk. It can help to calm a baby when upset or during an uncomfortable procedure. Babies can suck for comfort in different ways:

- from a mother's breast after feeding or expressing
- from a clean finger
- by using a dummy.

Appropriate use of dummies in the NICU has the following advantages:

- non-nutritive sucking reduces the experience of pain. Babies often become upset during uncomfortable procedures. Ways of calming a baby include holding and rocking, skin to skin contact or breastfeeding. These may not always be possible, and therefore the use of a dummy can be helpful
- non-nutritive sucking encourages sucking and weight gain
- sucking is a basic instinct for a newborn baby. A healthy term baby can suck from either breast or bottle and therefore does not need a dummy. A sick or pre-term baby may not be able to suck at the breast or bottle at all, or only for a short time once or twice a day

- a baby held in close contact with the breast during a tube feed can associate the breast with food, comfort and a full tummy. When this is not possible, offering a dummy during tube feeding helps encourage the baby to suck and to learn to associate sucking with the feeling of a full tummy. There is evidence that babies who are offered a dummy to suck during tube feeds gain weight more quickly
- non-nutritive sucking helps with breathing
- babies who need help with their breathing using CPAP (a special machine which helps the baby to breathe more easily) can be soothed and calmed when sucking on a dummy. The dummy also helps to maintain pressure in the breathing passages, which makes it easier for the baby to breathe.

Babies who will benefit most from non-nutritive sucking are:

- those who are unable to suck milk feeds due to a surgical problem
- those who are receiving help with their breathing using CPAP
- pre-term babies during tube feeding.

Are there any problems associated with using dummies?

The problem is that sucking on a dummy is different from sucking at the breast. The dummy is already formed and fairly rigid. The breast is soft and flexible. The baby must open his or her mouth wide to latch on to the breast, and the nipple goes to the back of the mouth, whereas the baby only needs to open his or her mouth a little to suck on a dummy.

The muscles of the mouth and face and the tongue move differently when sucking on a dummy; the action used with a dummy won't get milk out of a breast.

Problems that have been identified with the use of dummies in well, term babies are:

- difficulty in establishing breastfeeding
- early weaning (some studies suggest that using dummies encourages an earlier transition to bottle feeding for some babies who are having difficulty with establishing breast feeding)
- increased incidence of ear infections.

Research has not shown any short-term problems caused by pre-term or sick babies using a dummy. But because of the differences between sucking on a dummy and suckling at the breast, as soon as your baby is able to take more feeds at the breast (usually from about 33 weeks with a pre-term baby) then the use of the dummy should be limited, so your baby has lots of chance to practise at the breast. This will also help your milk supply.

Giving the baby a dummy

The baby's dummy should be washed in hot, soapy water and rinsed thoroughly and sterilised in the microwave as per instructions. When not in use, it should be stored in a clean plastic bag or container.

When giving the baby a dummy, gently brush the dummy against their lips; when their mouth opens, place the dummy on top of the tongue and hold it in place until strong sucking begins.

Allow your baby to suck on a dummy for a few minutes before an uncomfortable procedure, or if unsettled, until he or she is calm.

Allow your baby to suck on a dummy just before and during a tube feed.

Please note that if for any reason you would value a second opinion concerning your diagnosis or treatment, you are entirely within your rights to request this.

The first step would usually be to discuss this with the doctor or other lead clinician who is responsible for your care.

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