

Non-nutritive sucking on the Neonatal Unit

Congratulations on the birth of your baby. It is important to provide a positive experience for babies who are unable to breast or bottle feed straight away due to prematurity or illness.

The information here is to help you make an informed choice on the use of non-nutritive sucking while your baby is not able to feed for themselves.

What is non-nutritive sucking?

Non-nutritive sucking is where a baby sucks without receiving any nutrition, for example on a dummy or an empty breast.

Babies of all ages find sucking soothing. From as early as 11 weeks' gestation the baby in your womb will have gained practice and experience of sucking.

We have specialised pre-term dummies for babies weighing less than 1750g. Parents are welcome to bring in their own dummies for babies above this weight.

For hygiene reasons all dummies should be replaced after 1-2 months of use. Frequent sterilising is recommended during this time.

Benefits of non-nutritive sucking

For babies who are not able to feed due to being premature, poorly or needing surgery, offering non-nutritive sucking can:

- Support the development of normal sucking patterns (co-ordinate sucking and swallowing, which promotes earlier oral feeding).

- Encourage the association between sucking and having a full tummy, when offered with a tube feed.
- Help to soothe your baby during tests and procedures.
- Have a calming effect, reducing energy use, which may help improve their growth and weight.
- Help improve breathing and oxygenation.
- Stimulate the stomach to help digest milk more easily.
- Decrease the time your baby may have to spend in hospital.
- Help to reduce 'oral aversion' where a baby dislikes having things in their mouth.

Feeding Cues

Feeding cues are important ways your baby can tell you they are ready to try feeding. Feeding cues include:

- Opening their mouths (rooting).
- Licking their tongue.
- Sucking their fingers.
- Being awake and looking at you.



Opening mouth



Sucking fingers



Turning head/rooting

Crying is often the last way babies communicate that they are hungry. It is important that the early feeding cues are not missed or masked by offering a dummy too often. Our staff are trained in picking up these cues and we will support you in learning to recognise them in your baby.

Establishing breastfeeding

When your baby begins to establish breastfeeding you may wish to reduce the use of a dummy to avoid masking feeding cues, helping to encourage more frequent feeds at the breast.

Remember that you know your baby (and how to comfort them) best. If you feel you need further guidance on dummy use please speak to the nurse caring for your baby.

Long term dummy use

This leaflet provides information on non-nutritive sucking whilst your baby is in hospital and is learning to feed. Speak to your health visitor for further guidance on the use of dummies as your baby develops.

If you have any questions, please speak to a member of the Neonatal Team.