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Dummies and Non-Nutritive Sucking

Information and advice for parents with babies on the Neonatal Unit or Transitional Care

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You may not have given much thought as to whether you want your baby to have a dummy.

Your wishes as parents are very important and it is your choice as to whether your baby has a dummy or not.

This leaflet is provided in order to give some helpful information so you can make an informed choice about what you feel is best for your baby.

Non-nutritive sucking (NNS)

Non-nutritive sucking is sucking, but not feeding, for example when a baby sucks on their dummy, their thumb or your clean finger.

Preterm infants are sometimes born before they have developed the ability to suck, swallow and breathe in a coordinated way. A baby can suck from 28 weeks gestation (pregnancy), but the rhythm is irregular, and they may tire quickly.

The suck-swallow-breathe pattern starts to coordinate around 32-36 weeks as the baby matures either inside or outside the womb.

Where babies are acutely ill or premature, it has been found that the use of dummies can be of benefit.

- Babies are able to calm themselves and this can promote sleep, essential for growth and recovery.
- A calmer baby can be more medically stable e.g. heart rate, blood pressure.
- NNS can reduce distress during painful procedures or drug withdrawal.
- A dummy can improve the delivery of CPAP (a type of breathing support).
- NNS can give a baby chance to practice sucking and this may encourage them to coordinate and mature the suck-swallow-breathe pattern. This may make sucking more efficient, sooner, if bottle feeding.
- Sucking can stimulate stomach juices, which means that feeds are digested better.
- Dummies can build a positive association between oral (mouth) stimulation and fullness when given with a tube feed.
- They can also help babies to learn that oral stimulation is a pleasant experience, instead of an unpleasant one e.g. after needing breathing tubes for a long time.

Breastfeeding and dummies

It is considered important that we give parents information and support which will enable you to start and continue to breast feed as long as possible.

The hospital actively promotes breastfeeding, therefore, dummies are not generally recommended for babies who are starting to breastfeed.

This is because:

- The sucking action of a baby on a dummy is very different to that of breast feeding and their use can hinder the establishment of breastfeeding.
- Sucking on a dummy can interfere with a baby's ability to breastfeed effectively, during the crucial early weeks, when they are learning to breastfeed.
- Babies who use a dummy may have fewer breastfeeds, as mothers give a dummy to settle their baby, instead of a breastfeed. Fewer breastfeeds result in less breast stimulation and this reduces milk production.
- Dummy use can reduce the length of time you continue to breastfeed in the long term, and increase the need for formula.

Other problems

- Using a dummy, long term, can limit a growing infant's sound making and exploring with the mouth - essential for development.
- Long term dummy use can affect tooth development.
- Speech Therapists and Dentists would advise that you should try to stop dummy use between six and 12 months of age, and prior to this it should primarily be used for sleeping and settling your baby.
- Unless correctly sterilised, dummies can be a source of infection for infants.
- Babies who have cleft lip or palate repairs will not be allowed a dummy after surgery as it can interfere with healing and be a source of infection. This can cause problems if your baby has become dependant on a dummy for comfort.

Alternatives to using dummies

If your baby is unsettled there are things that you may be able to do to help, instead of giving a dummy.

- Keep very poorly babies calm by reducing noise and light where possible, and not handling them too much.
- If your baby isn't ready to be handled staff will talk to you about comfort holds and the best way to touch your baby.
- Babies and parents love skin to skin contact. It has many advantages. In this case, it can help stabilise the baby's heart rate and blood pressure, and keep them calm, particularly during procedures like blood tests and injections.
- Skin to skin contact is also a good opportunity to see your baby's feeding cues and try a lick, sniff or suckle at the breast.
- Some preterm babies, who are not ready to tolerate feeds, may enjoy suckling on a recently emptied (expressed) breast. They can lap, lick and suckle, and gain the benefits of a cuddle and skin to skin contact.
- Try putting baby to the breast for a feed, it might be just what he is wanting!

If you choose to give your baby a dummy, and want to breast feed, try and limit its use to when you are not with your baby. Use the alternatives as much as possible, when you are there.

Dummies and cot death

The Department of Health advise that it is possible that the use of a dummy, at the start of a sleep period, can reduce the risk of cot death, but suggest that you should not begin its use until breastfeeding is well established.

They also advise that you should stop giving a dummy when your baby is between six and 12 months old.

Breastfeeding itself however, in preference to formula feeding, is also associated with a reduced risk of cot death.

Please ask if you have any questions regarding the use of dummies.

Staff involved in your baby's care will be happy to help you!

What did you think of your care?

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