

## Fact Sheet

# Reducing pain for babies needing procedures in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU)

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During your baby's stay in hospital it is inevitable that she or he will require tests and procedures for medical reasons. Unfortunately, some of these procedures are painful but there are many ways in which you can help to minimise (decrease) the pain and distress your baby experiences.

Tests and procedures which cause pain will only be undertaken if absolutely necessary.

### What types of tests and procedures might my baby need?

**Blood tests-** will be taken when your baby is admitted to the NICU or SCN and may be needed on other occasions as ordered by the medical staff.

**Skin Punctures-** all newborn babies require a newborn screening test within the first few days of life. Babies in NICU may also need their blood glucose (sugar) or other tests to be checked on occasions. Most punctures are performed on the heel using a special lancet (small sharp needle), or alternatively a small needle may be placed in a vein on your baby's hand, foot, or arm to obtain a blood sample.

### Tubes

- Breathing tubes may be inserted into your baby's airway through his/her mouth or nose.
- Feeding tubes may also be inserted into the stomach, via the baby's nose or mouth, to provide milk feeds for your baby.

**A surgical operation-** some babies require an operation during the first month of life and pain can result from the surgery. This pain may last for several days after the operation. If the pain is severe then analgesic (pain killing) drugs can be given.

### How does your baby show they are experiencing pain?

Pain which your newborn feels is usually shown in his or her behaviour, as well as by their facial expressions, and changes in vital signs such as the baby's heart beating faster, or changes in blood pressure or skin colour.

The nurses and doctors will assess your baby's pain levels by using a standard pain scoring method. If your baby's pain is severe, or a procedure takes more time than expected, an analgesic (pain killing) drug can be given to reduce the pain.

### What can parents do to help reduce the pain their baby feels?

There are many ways in which pain and discomfort can be reduced during a procedure, including:

- Holding and supporting your baby
- Breastfeeding
- Swaddling (wrapping baby comfortably)
- Giving a sweet solution such as sucrose onto the baby's tongue

You can also assist the nurses and doctors by describing your baby's responses to the procedures. This helps the medical staff assess how much discomfort the baby is experiencing.

### Holding your baby

For certain procedures you can comfort your baby by holding and supporting him/her during the test. However do not feel that this is essential, you may decide it is too distressing for you to watch a procedure.

### Breastfeeding

If your baby is breastfed it can be helpful to give him, or her, the chance to breastfeed for a couple of minutes before a procedure.

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### Oral sucrose solution

Sucrose is a sweet sugar solution. Studies have shown that giving this on the tongue before and during a painful procedure reduces the baby's distress. Giving baby a dummy (pacifier) to suck on during the procedure can also be helpful. Small amounts of sucrose are safe for babies and help reduce pain during the first few months of life.



### Swaddling

Wrapping babies in a fabric cloth to support them during and after painful procedures helps reduce their responses to pain such as crying and agitation.

### Odour

Scent (smell) is one of the very first ways babies identify and bond with their parents. You can give your baby the comfort of your scent by leaving one or a pair of booties in your baby's incubator. Dab some expressed breast milk on them or wear them close to your heart and then leave with your baby. Refresh them regularly.

If you have any questions, or would like to know more about the management of your baby's pain, please ask the nurse, midwife or doctor caring for your baby.

**Please note: When your baby goes home, sweet solutions such as sugared water or honey should not be used. Once your baby begins teething, the sweet solutions can contribute to dental caries (holes in babies' teeth). Honey is not recommended for infants under 12 months of age, as honey may cause infant botulism. Botulism is a very serious illness of babies which needs urgent treatment in intensive care and can be fatal.**

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