

# Non-nutritive Sucking

## Patient Information

Infant Feeding Service

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## What is non-nutritive sucking?

Non-nutritive sucking is where a baby sucks without receiving any nutrition, for example on a dummy. Babies of all ages find sucking soothing. From as early as eleven weeks' gestation your baby will have gained practice and experience of sucking in the womb.

## What are the 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 effective 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.

## How is non-nutritive sucking encouraged?

Your baby is put to the breast immediately after the mother has expressed her milk, and while the baby is receiving expressed breast milk via tube feeding. Baby can practise sucking directly at the breast. In this way, the baby also learns to associate sucking with a full stomach.

Babies can also be allowed to nuzzle or lick at mother's nipple when having skin-to-skin care.

## Using a dummy

Babies should always use a dummy that is the correct size for their weight. For babies under 1.8kg, we have special premature dummies on the Unit. For babies over 1.8kg, a normal dummy is fine. You are welcome to bring in your own regular size dummies.

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

## **Feeding cues**

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

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

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 members are trained in picking up these cues and we will support you in learning to recognise them in your baby.

## **Establishing Oral Feeding**

When your baby begins to establish oral feeding you may wish to reduce the use of a dummy to avoid masking feeding cues. This can help to develop more effective feeding skills and will also encourage more frequent feeds at the breast which will in turn increase milk supply if breastfeeding.

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 use of a dummy**

This leaflet provides information on non-nutritive sucking whilst your baby is in hospital and is learning to feed. Speak to your Health Visitor or Speech & Language Therapist for further guidance on the use of dummies as your baby develops.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to speak to a member of the neonatal staff or the Speech & Language Therapist.

**With thanks to the NICU team at St. Mary's Hospital.**

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## Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends and carers.

## Contact Us

Tel: 01942 822376 (Monday to Friday 9am to 4pm)

The Patient Relations/PALS Manager  
Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust  
Royal Albert Edward Infirmary  
Wigan Lane  
Wigan WN1 2NN

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## Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the pros and cons of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



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## How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use and store the information we hold about you, please take a look at our “how we use your information” leaflet which can be found on the Trust website:  
[https://www.wwl.nhs.uk/patient\\_information/leaflets/](https://www.wwl.nhs.uk/patient_information/leaflets/)

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This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille and other languages upon request. For more information please ask in the department/ward.

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