Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Non-nutritive sucking v3

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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 (coordinate 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 practice 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.

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