

Nursing Alert

The nurse must observe preterm infants closely for behaviors that indicate readiness for oral feedings. These include:

- A strong, vigorous suck
- Coordination of sucking and swallowing
- A gag reflex
- Sucking on the gavage tube, hands, or a pacifier
- Rooting and wakefulness before and sleeping after feedings

When these behaviors are noted, infants can be challenged with oral feedings that are introduced slowly.

The infant may be held during gavage feedings by the caregiver or parent. If necessary, oxygen may be supplied via nasal cannula to facilitate handling. It is not recommended that the infant be removed from a primary source of oxygen for feedings, because doing so decreases oxygen availability. **Nonnutritive sucking (NNS)** on a pacifier may help bring the infant to a quiet alert state in preparation for feeding. Proposed benefits of NNS include improved weight gain, improved milk intake, more stable heart rate and oxygen saturation, earlier age at full oral feeds, and improved behavioral state. A systematic review of NNS found that infants receiving NNS were discharged significantly earlier than non-NNS infants and that they experienced a more rapid transition from tube to bottle feedings and better bottle-feeding performance. Additional research suggests that NNS may provide relief of mild to moderate pain associated with procedures such as heel sticks ([Liaw, Yang, Ti, et al, 2010](#)).

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An increase in gastric residuals, abdominal distention, bilious vomiting, temperature instability, apneic episodes, and bradycardia may be indicative of early necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) and should be reported to the practitioner.