

Developmental Care for Babies in the NICU



Special care for sick and premature babies

Advances in the care of sick and premature babies include new technology and medicine. There are treatments that focus on the special emotional and developmental needs of these babies. Babies in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) face many tests, procedures, noises, and lights. This is very different from the warm, dark, comfort of the mother's womb. Some babies are too sick to be held. Or they may have trouble comforting themselves when not being held. Premature babies need special support to help them continue to mature and develop as they would in their mother's womb.

What is developmental care?

This type of care is used in many NICUs to meet babies' special needs. Developmental care includes many aspects, such as:

- Meeting babies' comfort needs
- Helping babies feel secure
- Helping babies develop normal sleep patterns
- Decreasing stimulation from noise, lights, touch, or procedures

Research into this kind of care is showing many benefits for babies, especially for premature babies. These include:

- Shorter hospital stays
- Fewer complications
- Improved weight gain
- Better feeding
- Enhanced parent and infant bonding

Developmental care includes:

- Changing the baby's surroundings to provide normal day/night cycles and decrease noise and stress
- Using cushions to support the baby and keep the baby's arms and legs in good position to help with development and comfort
- Using cues from the baby to plan care at times when they are awake and least stressed, rather than disturbing sleep or doing procedures when the baby is at a high stress level

What is kangaroo care?

Kangaroo care is a practice that started in Colombia in the late 1970s. It has been used worldwide. This is because it is very helpful for premature babies. Kangaroo care means holding a NICU baby skin-to-skin, against the parent's chest. Premature and sick babies who have this contact appear to relax and become content. Several studies show that kangaroo care has many health benefits. These include:

- Higher blood oxygen levels

- Stability of heartbeat and breathing
- Help babies stay warm
- Better sleep
- Better breastfeeding
- More weight gain

Kangaroo care also helps parents feel close to their baby. This gives the parents confidence in their ability to meet their baby's needs. Mothers who use kangaroo care also tend to make more breast milk. Many of these effects in parents and babies are because skin-to-skin contact increases levels of oxytocin. Oxytocin is a hormone that naturally causes milk release. It also causes feelings of relaxation and connection.

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