Handle me with care
Supporting your premature baby's development
Acknowledgements

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Meeting the needs of the preterm baby

This booklet is about parents and staff working together in supporting the physical and psychological development of your baby. It will help you to understand your individual baby’s responses to care, and preferences too.

Positioning aims to provide safe, comfortable and appropriate care for preterm infants like yours who need help in coping with the environment outside their mother’s body. The emphasis is on the value of maintaining and facilitating flexed or curled up postures, especially early on. Initially you will watch your baby and provide gentle touch, perhaps stroking and talking softly, while neonatal staff handle and position your baby. Later you will be able to help with this. The text and photographs show a variety of ways in which this can be done and how babies of different ages and gestations may respond.

It is hard being a parent in the neonatal unit. Understanding and helping with this aspect of your baby’s needs is a way of providing the kind of care that seems to benefit your baby and feels right to you as a parent.

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About the Pampers Institute

The Pampers Institute is an international network of experts committed to understanding babies and all areas of their development and health. The members of the Pampers Institute provide advice, insights and information primarily via the website, www.pampers.com, which can be accessed by both health professionals and parents alike.
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About this series

Babies have physical and emotional needs

All babies need a lot of love and care. Premature babies have not experienced the same start in life as most babies, and they need help to make their time in neonatal care a little easier. Like all babies, they depend on caring adults to understand their emotional and physical needs. All babies need reassurance, and to feel safe and comfortable both physically and emotionally.

This booklet is part of a series of publications about supporting your baby’s needs. *Handle me with care* covers your baby’s physical needs and development during their time on the neonatal unit and once he/she comes home.

The second part of this series, *Look at me – I’m talking to you*, covers your baby’s emotional needs and helps you understand what your baby is communicating or ‘saying’ to you.

We recommend that in order to gain a full picture of your baby’s needs, both booklets should be read.

**USING THIS INFORMATION SAFELY AND SENSIBLY**

This publication is for guidance only and must be used with the support of staff on the neonatal unit. They will ensure that your baby’s condition is stable enough to allow safe use of the positions shown in this leaflet.

All babies should be treated as individuals. Each baby will respond to touch and positioning differently. Some positions shown in this booklet will be supportive for some babies, but may be disturbing for others.

Please read all sections of this booklet carefully. The introduction in particular provides important information about the physical development of premature babies and the use of positioning in some neonatal units. The most important thing is getting to know your baby, so that you can recognise what he/she needs to feel secure.
Introduction

Who is this booklet for?

This booklet is for parents of premature babies – especially babies who have spent less than 32 weeks in the womb before birth.

Babies born after 32 weeks of pregnancy will have more mature bodies and more developed movement skills, but their parents may also find this booklet useful.

At back of the leaflet, you will find details of research and reports used to put together the information in this leaflet. These are numbered throughout the text.

How are premature babies different?

A baby usually spends between 37 and 41 weeks in the womb before it is born. A baby who has been born at this stage is called a ‘term’ baby.

Premature babies are born before 37 weeks and miss out on the final stages of pregnancy, when they would have been tightly curled up in the mother’s womb. These last few weeks in the womb are important for the baby’s future development.

From birth, gravity begins to have an effect and may cause your premature baby’s arms and legs to flop out to the sides. If your baby remains in such a position over many weeks, some muscles may become too tight and strong, while others may become weak. This imbalance can affect the early development of your baby’s movement.

The good news is that you and the neonatal team can promote your baby’s physical development by placing his/her body in special, supported positions. Good positioning can also make your baby feel safer and more secure.
Positioning

What is positioning?

Everyone is familiar with the way that babies curl up within the womb. Positioning basically means gently placing your baby in this curled up position, providing the right type of support and creating a snug and secure feeling.

In general, here is how your premature baby should be positioned: arms and legs should be curled up, with knees and elbows tucked towards the middle of the body. The spine should be curved and the head should be tucked slightly forwards.

It is important for premature babies to develop this curled up posture, because it is an important basis for their future physical development.1,2,3,4

CHECK FOR SAFETY

All neonatal units are different and not all units practise positioning as described in this booklet. It is very important that you do not attempt to start positioning your baby without the agreement and guidance of staff on the neonatal unit.

All babies are different too, with varying clinical needs. The neonatal staff will make sure that your baby is ready and that his/her medical condition is stable enough for positioning.

It is always very important to check that positioning is not restricting your baby's breathing in any way.

Initially your baby will probably be positioned by staff in the neonatal unit. During this time, you can watch and learn how to handle and move your baby in the safest and gentlest way. As your baby develops and becomes stronger, you may be able to position him/her yourself.
The curled up position also helps your premature baby learn to control his/her behaviour to feel calmer and safer. This development process is called self-organisation.¹ ² ³ ⁴

Look at the difference between the posture of the baby in the womb, and the posture of the unsupported, immature baby in the cot.

What are the benefits?

Research has shown that for some babies, good positioning can help development in various ways.¹ ² ³ ⁴ Positioning may:

- protect your baby’s delicate skin
- improve the quality of your baby’s sleep
- help your baby stabilise his/her heartbeat and breathing, and so save energy
- help your baby learn to co-ordinate hand-to-mouth movement
- help your baby learn to feed
- help your baby feel safer
- encourage your baby to relax.

Who can help on the neonatal unit?

Neonatal physiotherapists work as members of the neonatal team, and use their specialised knowledge about physical development to assess the quality of your baby’s movement skills. Many neonatal units have a physiotherapist as part of the team. However, other neonatal staff may also give advice on positioning. These professionals might include occupational therapists and neonatal nurses.
Signals from your baby

Recognising your baby’s needs

Every baby learns in his/her own individual way. On top of these personal variations, there are important differences between premature babies, and babies who have been born after a full-term pregnancy, when it comes to learning about movement.

This is because premature babies are exposed to different experiences outside the womb when their bodies are still immature and developing.

Your baby is giving you signals all the time, for example, through behaviour or body language. When handling your baby, it is important to watch for and respond to these signals. Some signs of stress include:
- sudden changes in heart rate or breathing rate
- suddenly going floppy or stiff
- a scowling face
- waving arm movements
- stiffly extended arms and legs.

Please see the BLISS booklet *Look at me, I’m talking to you* for more information on your baby’s body language.

You may notice ways in which your baby tries to help himself/herself. Your baby may:
- curl up
- brace his/her legs
- grasp your finger
- fold his/her arms together
- suck his/her hands, as shown in the picture on the right.

When your baby is feeling calm and happy,