

## Basic Baby Care

### *Caring for your baby at home*

*This handout, written for parents of babies in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU), explains the basics of caring for a new baby at home.*

All new parents must learn how to care for their baby's basic needs. When you are the parent of a NICU baby, learning about these things while your baby is in the hospital will help you feel more confident about caring for your baby at home.



*Learning about caring for your baby while you are in the hospital will help you feel more confident at home.*

### Diapers

- Diapers must be changed several times a day. Every time you feed your baby, check to see if the diaper needs changing.
- Make sure to wash your hands with soap and water after every diaper change.
- Your baby should have 6 to 8 wet diapers a day. This number means your baby is getting enough milk. If your baby has 3 dry diapers in a row after 3 feedings, call your baby's doctor.
- When you are changing a diaper, look closely at your baby's skin:
  - If your baby's bottom or groin is red, clean the area well with wipes or water. Apply an unscented cream or lotion to the area to protect it from moisture. Do **not** use products that contain alcohol.
  - If you see a raised, bumpy rash, your baby may have a yeast infection. Call your baby's doctor.

### Stool

- Many babies have a bowel movement during or after every feeding. Others may go as little as once every 3 days.
- Breastfed babies' stools are often yellow or loose.

- Bottle-fed babies usually have soft, slightly formed stools that are yellow, green, tan, or brown in color.
- If you are breastfeeding, changes in your diet can change the color or form of your baby's stools. This is normal.

**Call your baby's primary care provider (PCP) if your baby's stool is:**

- Hard or very dry, or your baby seems to be uncomfortable when having bowel movements (constipation)
- Watery or looser and more explosive than usual (diarrhea)
- White, red, or black

## Using a Bulb Syringe

After using the bulb syringe, always clean it in hot, soapy water.

### Clearing the Nose

A stuffy nose can make it hard for your baby to breathe. This can make your baby fussy, especially when trying to eat or sleep.

You can use a bulb syringe to clear mucous from your baby's mouth and nose. To do this:

- Gently squeeze the bulb to release the air.
- While still squeezing the bulb, place the tip at the base of your baby's nostril.
- Slowly release pressure on the bulb.
- If mucus or milk enters the syringe, squirt it into a cloth.
- Repeat until the nose is clear.

### Clearing the Mouth

You can also use a bulb syringe to clear milk from your baby's mouth:

- Gently squeeze the bulb to release the air.
- While still squeezing the bulb, place the tip into the cheek pocket of one side of your baby's mouth.
- Slowly release pressure on the bulb.
- If saliva or milk enters the syringe, squirt it into a cloth.
- Repeat with the cheek pocket on the other side of your baby's mouth.
- **Important:** Do **not** put the syringe tip into the back of your baby's mouth. This can make your baby gag and choke.

## Baths

Most babies do not need baths more than 3 times a week. Bathing more often than 3 times a week may dry your baby's skin and wash away the natural oils that keep the skin healthy.

## Getting Ready

To get ready to give your baby a bath:

- Make sure the room where you will bathe your baby is warm and free of drafts.
- Gather the supplies you will need – mild soap, washcloth, and towels.
- Fill the tub with only about 3 inches of warm water.
- Check the water temperature with your wrist or elbow to make sure that it is lukewarm. It should be about 90°F (32°C).

## Important Safety Tips

- Set your water heater to 120°F (48.8°C) to avoid scalding.
- **Never** place your baby in the tub while the water is running. The water may get too hot or too deep.
- **Always** keep one hand on your baby while in the bath. To do this, try:
  - Cradling your hand under your baby's head and shoulders as you wash.
  - Using blankets or towels underneath your baby to help hold the baby in position, then placing one hand around your baby's head.
- **Never** leave your baby alone in the tub or near water.

## Washing

- First, wash your baby's face with just a wet washcloth. **Do not use soap to wash the face.** Wash the eyes from the inner edge of the eye (by the nose) to the outer edge. Use a different (clean) part of the washcloth for each eye. Then wash the rest of your baby's face with water only.
- Do **not** use cotton tipped swabs (Q-tips) to clean your baby's ears or nose. Swabs can cause injury.
- After washing the face, add soap to a washcloth and wash the body. Lift your baby's shoulders so that you can reach the back of the neck and clean between the skin folds.
- Next, lay your baby down on their back and lift their chin to expose the front of the neck. Gently clean between the skin folds.

- When you wash your baby's arms and legs, remember to clean between the fingers and toes as well.
- Wash the diaper area last. Be sure to clean between the skin folds. You may want to clean the folds after the baby comes out of the tub.
  - *For girls:* Always wipe her vaginal area from front to back. This can help prevent bladder infections.
  - *For boys:* If your baby's penis is not circumcised, do not pull the foreskin back when washing. This may cause damage. The foreskin will pull back on its own between 4 and 8 years of age. No special care is needed until then.

**Important: Never leave your baby alone in the tub. If you must leave the room while you are giving a bath, wrap your baby in a towel and take him with you.**

## **Cord Care**

- The umbilical cord usually falls off between 10 to 14 days after birth.
- Your baby's cord will change from yellowish to brown or black as it dries out and then falls off.
- If the cord and base get dirty, clean with mild soap and water, then dry with a clean cloth.
- You may choose to do sponge baths and not put your baby in a tub until the cord falls off. When sponge bathing:
  - Swaddle your baby in a towel first. Uncover only the part of the body you are washing and keep the rest of the body covered.
  - Wash, rinse, and dry each part of the uncovered body before rewrapping it and washing the next part.
- Keep the front of your baby's diaper folded down under the cord so that the cord stays dry.
- Each time you change your baby's diaper, check the cord. Call your baby's doctor if you see any of these signs of infection:
  - Bad smell
  - Redness
  - Yellow pus or bleeding

## **Protect Your Baby's Skin and Eyes**

Babies have sensitive skin and eyes. Also, skin conditions can be inherited. If you have sensitive skin, your baby might, too.

- If you are using lotions or creams on the diaper area, apply only lightly after bathing. If you apply lotion, use products that are unscented and do not contain any alcohol.
- To protect your baby's skin, wash new clothing and towels before using them on your baby. Use mild laundry detergents.
- If your baby gets a rash on areas that contact clothing, your detergent could be too harsh. Try switching to a milder baby detergent or one that does not have any dyes or scents.
- Bath soaps can irritate a baby's skin, especially if your baby tends to get rashes. Choose mild, scent-free products.
- Baby acne does not need special care. Just keep your baby's skin clean and dry. Do not squeeze pimples, as it could cause scars.
- A new baby's skin and eyes are sensitive to direct sunlight. Until your baby is at least 6 months old:
  - Keep your baby in the shade or put on protective clothing and a hat if you are taking them out in the sun.
  - Do not use sunscreen on your baby.
  - Put baby-sized sunglasses on your baby on bright, sunny days to protect sensitive young eyes.
- In the winter, keep your baby warm, but do not overbundle. If your baby is overheated, heat rash can occur. Dress your baby in layers and remove 1 layer at a time if you can tell your baby is getting too warm.
- Newborn fingernails and toenails are usually soft and flexible. It is safest to gently use a nail file or emery board to shorten and smooth your baby's nails.

## **If Your Baby Has Diaper Rash**

- Change diapers as soon as they get wet or soiled.
- Use a soft cloth, water, and mild soap to clean the rash area. Do not use ready-made baby wipes. The perfume or alcohol in wipes may irritate and dry your baby's skin and make the rash worse.
- Pat your baby dry. Do not rub. Let the diaper area air-dry fully before putting on a fresh diaper.
- Apply a thick layer of ointment or cream.

- Do **not** use baby powder. Babies can inhale the powder into their lungs and have breathing problems.

## **Keep Your Baby at a Comfortable and Safe Temperature**

### **At Home**

- Keep the temperature in your house the same that adults are comfortable with.
- Keep your baby away from drafts and windows.
- Remove your baby's clothes when they get wet and put on dry clothes.
- If your baby's hands and feet are cool or look pale or blue:
  - Warm them with a blanket or cover them with mittens and booties.
  - If the color does not improve, call your baby's PCP.

### **For Outings**

- Dress your baby as you dress yourself, based on the weather. Or, dress your baby with one more layer of clothing than you are wearing.
- Do not overdress your baby or cover with too many blankets, especially when sleeping.
- Put a hat on your baby when you go outside, year-round. Babies can get too hot from the sun if their heads are not covered in hot weather. Babies also easily lose heat from their heads in cold weather. (Be sure to cover your baby's feet, too.)

### **Fever or Low Temperature**

- Call your baby's PCP if your baby has a fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C).
- If your baby's temperature is lower than 97°F (36°C):
  - Undress your baby and place skin-to-skin on your chest. Wrap yourselves with blankets.
  - Call your baby's PCP if the baby does not warm up after 1 hour.

### **Questions?**

Your questions are important. Talk with a member of your baby's healthcare team if you have questions or concerns.

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