

## Handout for parents

### **Caring for your baby: Holding your baby, washing and bathing your baby and changing your baby's nappy**

When you have a baby there are a lot of things to think about. In this leaflet we look at three practical parts of caring for a baby. We hope it gives you some basic information. But, perhaps more importantly, we would like to give you a few minutes to think about how you can make the most of these simple activities to develop a loving and sensitive relationship with your baby. The interaction between you and your baby in these everyday tasks is really important for your baby's development. The task is an opportunity to talk to your baby, explain what you are doing and perhaps have a bit of a play at the same time. To us it may be just a task, but to a baby its precious time with you.

#### **Holding a baby**

Parents have often heard or read advice about how you should hold a baby. These are some of the most common things that parents hear.

- You have to hold a baby's head.
- You can hold a baby over your shoulder when winding.
- Babies like to be held tight.
- You can pat their back while holding them.
- Babies like to held close to you.
- They can be hard to hold when you are bathing them.

Caring for a baby is not just physical, it is full of experiences that can stir up many different feelings. These are some feelings parents have expressed about holding a baby:

- Worried about not supporting their head.
- Frightened of dropping them.
- Worried about how firm to hold them.
- Looking forward to cuddling their baby.
- Worried about spoiling their baby by holding them too much.
- Worried about dropping them when they are wet.
- Excited.

When you hold your baby after they are first born you may experience a mixture of feelings, such as feeling scared and excited and you may feel these at the same time. Your baby will be getting used to the world outside the womb, will be changing and developing rapidly and your confidence and skills as a parent will increase as your baby grows. Getting to know your baby is the best way to speed up learning as a parent.

As a parent your senses will give you a lot of information to help you make decisions about how you hold your baby.

- How floppy or steady does your baby's head look and feel?
- Does your baby respond in a certain way when you hold them in a particular way?
- In what positions does your baby become more settled or wriggle or cry when you hold them?
- In what positions does your baby appear most content?

### **Here are some questions parents often ask?**

#### **Does my baby's head need supporting?**

When babies are born it is true that their head will need supporting as their muscle control is still under development. Each baby is individual and just as with other parts of their development, babies will gain control of their neck and body muscles at different rates. As the weeks progress, you will notice that the amount of support the baby needs will decrease. At first it will feel like you have to think about this a lot, but before you know it you will adjust the way you support your baby's neck and body without even thinking about it.

#### **In what positions can you hold a baby?**

Parents hold babies in range of positions, such as, cradling or holding a baby upright against their chest with the baby's head resting on their shoulder or positioning their baby facing downwards along their forearm.

Parents have said that holding a baby in certain positions can be helpful for different activities.

**Feeding:** Cradling can be helpful. Remember the information in Session 5 on positioning for breastfeeding and bottle feeding.

**Winding:** There are a range of positions and advice on this topic, such as sitting a baby upright on your lap while supporting your baby's chin and upper body with your hand. You can also rub your baby's back. This can be soothing for both you and your baby. Being relaxed may help with winding, but the action of rubbing the back does not actively bring up the wind. Holding your baby upright against your chest with their head resting on your shoulder may also help.

The best position is the one that works for your baby.

**Soothing when your baby is unsettled or has colic:** This could be a combination of all positions and will depend on how your baby responds to different positions.

**Settling to sleep:** Again this is will depend on what positions your baby prefers. You may have heard of or seen a reflex that babies have, which is called the moro reflex or startle reflex. The startle reflex is a survival instinct, where a baby stretches out their arms if they are startled or feel as though they are falling. If you have seen this, you may have noticed it occurs when a baby is put a cot or bath. In both of these instances babies are being lowered. Holding your baby close to you but not too close and watching your baby's response may help to stop this reflex. You will be able to adjust how quickly you lower your baby into a bath or cot if you watch your baby's response.

### **Washing and bathing your baby**

General information about washing and bathing a baby can be obtained from NHS Choices website. <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/washing-your-baby.aspx#close>

## **Common questions parents ask are:**

### **How often do I need to bath my baby?**

It is not necessary to bath your baby every day. Two or three times a week is ok. However, you may choose to bath your baby everyday if your baby enjoys a bath or a bath is part of your baby's bedtime routine.

On the days you do not bath your baby, you should wash their face, under their chin and neck, hands and bottom and genitals.

### **How often do I need to wash my baby?**

You can wash your baby's face, under their chin and neck, hands and bottom and genitals on the days you do not bath them. This is known as 'top and tailing'

### **What temperature should the water be?**

The water should feel warm. You should check the temperature of the water with your wrist or elbow, as using your hand may not give you the best gauge. There are temperature bath thermometers available if you choose to use one. The ideal temperature is between 37-38 degrees centigrade. Bath thermometers are not really necessary as you can use your judgement about what feels warm and it is still important to test the water for yourself in case the thermometer is faulty.

If you watch how your baby reacts when you wash or bath them you will learn what sort of temperature they prefer. Each baby will react differently to being washed or bathed. Some will remain calm while others will find the change in their skin temperature unsettling and may even cry at first.

If your baby is unsettled by being washed you can help your baby by talking to them in a soothing voice. You could gradually introduce them to the water by using your hand to let a small amount of water flow over their body before putting them into the water. When you are lowering your baby into the bath this is also a time when the startle reflex is most likely to be triggered and your baby may need to be soothed before you begin to wash them.

### **Do I need to soap?**

It is best to just use water especially in the first month. There are lots of bath solutions available and if you choose to use one you will need to see what suits your baby's skin.

### **How do I wash my baby?**

You can use a small bowl, baby bath or even put your baby in the bath with you. Some parents use a sink. In this case it is important to make sure your baby cannot touch the 'hot' tap to avoid the risk of a burn injury. When you start to wash your baby you can wash your baby's face and hair before you put them in the water. It is important for you to feel comfortable when washing your baby. Parents can feel a little worried at first about dropping their baby when their baby is wet, so you may find it helpful to collect everything together before you start and be sitting down.

### **When is the best time to wash/bath my baby?**

The best time to bath your baby is when they are not too full, too tired or too unsettled and when you have time to bath your baby so that you can both enjoy the experience. Bath time is often a fun time and is a special time for you and your baby. It can also be a way of calming a baby before bed and can be an important part of a bedtime routine.

### **How can I make bath time a pleasant experience for my baby and me?**

- Choose a time when you feel you have time to take your time!  
Relax and enjoy the experience.
- Your baby will be tuning into your voice, so talking to them and telling them what you are doing will help you and your baby communicate with each other. They may not understand the words, but they will begin to recognise the rhythm of your words and try to 'talk' back to you with their arms, legs and face!
- Young babies focus a lot on human faces, so seeing a happy face and hearing a soothing voice while they are being washed will help to make bath time enjoyable for both of you.

- Toys can add to the enjoyment of bath time. However, in the early weeks and months of life your baby will want to focus mainly on their relationship with you. So start off by talking, singing and having a chat with your baby. Then as your baby develops, you can add toys at a later date.

**Although it may seem obvious, it is important never to leave a baby alone when bathing a baby even if there are only a few inches of water in the bowl/bath.**

### **How do I change my baby's nappy?**

More information about changing a baby's nappy can be found on the NHS Choices website. <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/pages/washing-your-baby.aspx#close>

Common questions parents have asked are:

### **How often do I need to change my baby's nappy?**

This may vary from baby to baby, but you need to change your baby's nappy when they are wet or have passed a stool (also known as poo or faeces) to avoid their skin becoming sore. Each baby is individual and babies may give out a range of different signs that they are uncomfortable, such as wriggling, crying or appearing unsettled.

Your baby's first poo will be greenish/black and is called meconium and then it will change to a yellowish colour in the next few days. A baby will pass poos very frequently in the first few weeks. After this they will happen less often.

Some babies will need changing before a feed and others after a feed or even both in the early weeks.

As you get to know your baby you will begin to recognise the signs your baby gives that it is time to change their nappy.

### **What nappies can I use?**

There are a range of nappies available, both cotton and disposable. The choice is yours and you can find more information on the NHS Choices website.

### **What do I use to clean my baby?**

You can use cotton wool with water, baby lotion or baby wipes. Each baby's skin is different so you will need to choose the one that suits your baby.

### **Do I need to use nappy cream?**

You do not need to use nappy creams on a regular basis. Nappy creams can be helpful if your baby has nappy rash as they can act as a barrier and soothe the skin. If you still worried about your baby's skin you can talk to your Health Visitor or GP for advice.

### **Is there a difference in the way boys' and girls' nappy area is cleaned?**

Yes, because girls and boys are physically different in the nappy area it can be helpful to clean them in the following ways:

Girls: To avoid getting germs and poo in the vagina you should clean girls from the front to the back.

Boys: You can clean around the testicles (balls) as well as lifting them to clean underneath. You may have heard that you need to pull back the foreskin to clean it. But this is not necessary. You do not have to pull back the foreskin to clean it.

### **Other things to think about when changing your baby's nappy**

#### **Safety**

If you choose to position a changing mat on a raised area it is common sense not to leave your baby alone even when they are very young. Although young babies may not move a lot, they can wriggle and could fall. As they become older and more mobile you may find it easier to change their nappy on the floor.

#### **Using nappy changing time to build your relationship and communicate with your baby.**

When you are changing your baby's nappy it is a great time to communicate with your baby. Your baby will respond to the sound of your

voice and the expressions on your face. You can tell your baby what you are doing or sing a nursery rhyme to help keep them calm. It is also a time when you can have a 'chat' with your baby.

When your baby begins to make sounds you can acknowledge them and respond by replying to them. This is one of many opportunities in the day when you can start to have a two way conversation, taking turns with your baby. It will help your baby's language development. If you start early, you will be building a smooth rhythm into how you and your baby interact when you change their nappy.

As your baby grows and begins to move around, you may find that having a conversation can help to calm them and they can focus on you rather than moving around too much. Later you may also find it helps to give your baby a toy to play with when they are having their nappy changed.