

The benefits of baby massage

An information leaflet for mums and dads of special care babies

***For easier reading, we have used he/him in this information sheet to describe the baby, but we do mean all babies.**

Baby massage can be a beautiful way to get to know your baby and can give you a greater sense of confidence as a parent. It offers a way of communicating, playing, care-giving and sharing, for the wonderful journey of life ahead.

It is never too soon to start baby massage, as long as your baby's medical condition allows. In the very early stages after birth, or if your baby is extremely poorly, it may be necessary to use a more subtle approach like containment holding *. A small number of neonatal units introduce baby massage while babies are still in hospital, but it's not too late when baby comes home as well/either.

(*Containment holding- please see BLISS booklet *Handle Me with Care & Parent Information Guide*)

Before starting any massage on your baby while he is in hospital, it is very important that you check with the nurses or a qualified (IAIM- International Association of Infant Massage) baby massage instructor that your baby is medically stable enough.



Having a premature baby can be a very stressful experience. As parents, you may feel that you should be the ones caring for him rather than the doctors and nurses. Baby massage is a way in which you can get involved with your baby's care and help him and yourself feel better.

Baby massage can help your baby feel more relaxed. It can be especially supportive for babies who have experienced painful medical procedures. Your baby's first experience of touch may have been very unwelcoming, which makes your loving touch all the more important.

The safest touch is done with respect for your baby's 'needs' and 'signs' (see the BLISS leaflet Look at me I'm talking to you! for more information on this). For example, signs that show that your baby may need some 'time out' or a break, might include yawning, sneezing or hiccups. Give your baby plenty of time, lots of pauses with a resting still hand, and if the signs continue, stop and try again another time.

Baby massage can help with bonding

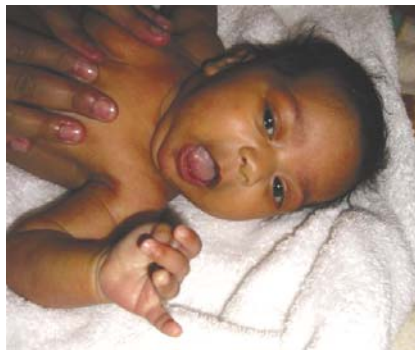
When you imagined having a baby, you might not have imagined that you would be separated from him. If he's sick or premature it's most likely that this will happen. This can mean that it may take a little longer for you to form a connection with each other.

Baby massage can help encourage this special connection between you. This link to you can be strengthened in your baby through all his senses, such as your smell, hearing your voice, and feeling your loving touch. It's a way for you both to communicate with each other and to build that special bond that will remain with you throughout life.

- The chemicals of love

There are special chemical messengers in you and your baby that can also help to strengthen the special connection described above. The main one is called oxytocin. Oxytocin, a hormone, is released in our bodies when we give or receive pleasurable touch, especially from those that we love. Oxytocin can make you and your baby feel good. It can reinforce or encourage the feeling of closeness that parents may feel is missing due to the situation. For mums it can increase breast milk production. It can also help you stay calm so you become more in tune with your baby's feelings and his need for comfort and understanding.

Baby massage and skin-to-skin contact (kangaroo care) can increase the levels of oxytocin in you and your baby.



Baby massage can lower stress levels

There are also chemicals in our bodies that can increase when we are under stress. The main one is called cortisol. Daily massage in medically stable premature babies has shown to lessen their cortisol levels. Baby massage can be a positive way for you to help de-stress him and yourself.

Baby massage can help keep your baby calm and contented

By massaging your baby you can help keep him calm and contented. This will assist him in adjusting his breathing, helping him to become less agitated. It will help him calm himself down, use less energy (more can be used for growing & healing), sleep better, shut down from too much noise or light and be comforted more easily. By helping your baby to be more calm and contented you are helping him to have a more stable heart and breathing rate with less need for extra oxygen (where this is relevant). You may also notice a rosier colour in his cheeks and a greater ability for him to take his feeds well. All of these elements are commonly referred to as being in an 'organised state'. This organised state will help provide the best conditions for his brain to develop as normally as possible.

Baby massage can help him to achieve this 'organised' state. It also provides a way for you to tune into your baby's needs, likes and dislikes.

Baby massage can help your baby's physical development

The healthiest way for the bones to grow and develop is by gently helping your baby's joints and muscles to move. Babies in special care can spend a lot of time tucked up lying on their tummy or back as they do not have the capability to move themselves. They rely on staff or parents to move and change their position. Sometimes due to this lack of movement they can suffer from a medical condition called osteopenia of prematurity. This means that they lack the vital bone minerals needed to strengthen the bones.

By having a baby massage routine, which can include gentle yoga type exercises, you can lessen the possibility of your baby developing osteopenia of prematurity, as long as their nutritional needs are also met.

To summarize

Many research studies have shown that the excellent effects of baby massage in stable and sick premature babies can:

- Improve weight gain
- Help the baby to become more organised
- Allow the baby to be more alert, so he can interact with you and others
- Help start oral feeding earlier (rather than tube feeding)
- Result in baby being discharged from hospital earlier
- Promote healthier bones



Baby massage can lay the foundations for your baby's emotional development and encourage love, trust and intimacy between you both.

For further information on how to find a baby massage instructor in your area, please contact The International Association of Infant Massage: General Enquiries 07816 289788 www.iaim.org.uk or email: mail@iaim.org.uk

If you would like information on how to begin baby massage at home, please refer to Johnson's baby leaflet on baby massage, available from Johnsons on 01628-821441 or a recommended reading book which has step by step instructions on how to massage your baby entitled *Infant Massage – A handbook for loving parents* by Vimala McClure. (ISBN 285-63617-0)

BLISS Family support helpline FREEPHONE 0500 618 140
www.bliss.org.uk email: parentsupport@bliss.org.uk

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