



Townsville
Hospital
and Health
Service

Physiotherapy for your baby

*Information for parents of the Neonatal Intensive
Care Unit (NICU) and Special Care Nursery*



Why might your baby need physiotherapy?

One of the main roles of a physiotherapist in the NICU and Special Care Nursery is to help babies move well.

This booklet has been prepared to help the development of movement and posture in your baby. It will give you some practical tips on handling your new baby and ideas about ways to encourage your baby to learn through movement and their senses. If you have any questions please ask the physiotherapist in the nursery.

A note about your baby's age

A baby usually spends between 37 to 41 weeks in the womb before being born. A baby who is born at this stage is called a term baby. Premature babies are born before 37 weeks. A premature baby has two ages:

1. Actual or Chronological Age is your baby's age since birth
2. Corrected Age is the age your baby would be if he/she was born on the due date

For example, if your baby is six months old and was born two months early, the corrected age is four months.

This is important to consider. Your baby's

development should always be looked at in terms of his/her corrected age.

How are premature babies different?

Premature babies 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 tightly curled up position are important to a baby's future development.

Because premature babies miss out on this, they often seem more flattened out rather than in the curled up position. Also, after birth gravity begins to have an effect on your baby and may cause their arms and legs to flop out to the sides in a flattened out extended posture.

If your baby remains in such a position, some muscles may become too tight and strong, while other muscles may become weak. This imbalance can affect the early development of your baby's movement.

You can promote your baby's physical development by placing their body in supported positions with good handling and movement activities. Good positioning and handling can also make your baby feel safer and more secure.

Positioning your baby

Positioning your baby well can help with the development of good movement and posture, making your baby feel more safe and secure, preserve energy and promote growth.

Here are some positions to try:



With your baby on their back, use rolled up blankets or towels to support a curled up position with their hands together in the middle and hips and knees bent.



With your baby on their side, use rolled up blankets or towels along their back to support a curled up position with their hands together in the middle and hips and knees bent. Always monitor your baby when they are on their side.

Picking up your baby

To help your baby feel more secure and less likely to startle, pick up your baby through their side in a curled up position. This will also encourage the development of head control.

- Roll your baby slowly onto their side making sure you keep them in a curled in position
- Place a hand on your baby's chest and back to support your baby as you lift
- Alternate which side you pick your baby up from each time
- Lie your baby back down reversing this suggestion

Sleeping

- It is important that you follow Safe Sleeping Guidelines to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS)
- Always sleep your baby on their back
- Ensure your baby's face and head is uncovered
- Use a firm and flat surface
- Ensure that your baby sleeps for equal amount of time with their head turned to the left, right and middle to prevent their head developing a flat spot
- Further information can be found on the SIDS and Kids website:

www.sidsandkids.org



Swaddling your baby

Swaddling is a good way to help your baby settle and feel secure.

- Wrap your baby so their hands are together in the middle and forward. Avoid wrapping with arms straight
- Wrap your baby so their legs can move around freely, their hips and knees need to be slightly bent
- Do not place your baby on their belly when wrapped
- Your baby can be wrapped until about three months corrected age.

Carrying your Baby

Keep your baby curled with head in the middle and hips and knees bent and arms forward. Here are some positions to try:



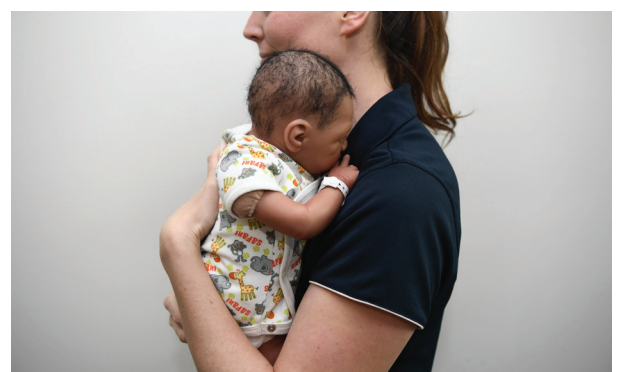
Armchair Position

Carry your baby in the crook of your elbow, like sitting in an armchair. Make sure your baby's arms are forward and hips and knees bent.



Tummy Hold

Lying on their tummy over your forearm and facing outwards. Rest your baby's head near your elbow. Bring arms forward and encourage hip bending.



Over Your Shoulder

Carry your baby high over your shoulder with both arms forward and hips and knees bent.

Exercises

You can help your baby learn through movement. Start the following exercises when your baby's condition is stable – in an isolette or an open cot.

When you do any exercises do not push or force any movement. Wait for your baby to relax or try again later. Always let your baby guide your movement. You can position your baby's head in the midline using a rolled up towel or nappy (or ask your physiotherapist about peanut pillows).

Each exercise can be done 5-10 times depending on your baby's response. Nappy change time or before a feed are good times to do some exercise.

Activity 1 – Hands Together and Hands to Mouth

Lie your baby on their back with their head in the middle. Help your baby bring their hands together in the middle and to their mouth.

Step 1:



Step 2:



Activity 2 – Leg Rocking

Lie your baby on their back with their head in the middle. Gently bend your baby's legs towards their chest with knees together, then gently rock from side to side.

Step 1:



Step 2:



Activity 3 – Leg Cycling

Lie your baby on their back with their head in the middle. Cradle your baby's legs in your hands. Gently bend their knee and cycle their legs up and down.

Step 1:



Step 2:



Activity 4 – Tummy Stimulation

Lie your baby on their back with their head in the middle. Stroke or tickle your baby's tummy to help hip and knee bending. This will also help strengthen the abdominal muscles.



Activity 5 – Side-lying Play

Place your baby on their side with their hands forward and together and hips and knees bent. Offer toys to look at. You can support them using a rolled-up towel behind their back. Make sure you alternate between left and right sides.



Activity 6 - Tummy Time

It is important for all babies to have some time every day on their tummy when awake and supervised. You can start this in hospital and continue when you take your baby home. If you start early, your baby will be happy in this position.

Play time on the tummy helps to develop strong neck, shoulders, back and tummy muscles, which are important for learning to roll, sit, crawl and stand.



Tummy Time doesn't just need to be on a mat, try these other ideas:



Baby's Head shape

Babies have very soft and flexible skulls and too much time spent on one side of their head can result in narrowing of the head or asymmetry. If this happens you may notice that your baby's head is flatter on one side.

To prevent this and promote a symmetrical head shape it is important to vary the position of your baby's head when they are lying on their back. Make sure they vary their head position from left to right and in the middle.

As your baby's movement and vision develop you can also encourage your baby to turn their own head using toys, windows/lights.

If you have any concerns regarding your baby's head shape contact your physiotherapist, GP or child health nurse.

Sensory stimulation

Vision

Your baby's vision is still developing. When baby is resting or asleep, make sure lights are dimmed or off. When your baby is awake, they can see best around 20-25cm from their face. Come close to your baby to establish eye contact. You can encourage eye follow by slowly moving side to side, and you can also use coloured toys or black and white designs for them to track.

Hearing

Your baby's hearing is still developing. Limiting loud noise in the special care nursery and NICU is very important. When your baby is awake, gently talk, sing or hum to them. You can also imitate sounds your baby makes. Avoid sudden, loud noises, as these will startle your baby.

Movement through Space

It is important for your baby to experience gentle movement. When your baby is awake, you can try:

- Hold your baby close and gently rock them

- Try a hammock for smooth rocking movement
- Gently roll your baby from side to side
- Avoid sudden movement, it may startle your baby

Touch and Massage

As your baby grows, they will enjoy your gentle touch. You can use skin to skin contact and kangaroo care. Massage is also a lovely bonding activity that can be beneficial for you and your baby. Make sure that your hands are warm and use a flat palm to massage your baby. Use a circular motion for head and limbs, or a smooth stroking down the trunk and limbs.

When massaging your baby remember:

- Make sure the room and your hands are warm
- Remove any jewellery that may scratch your baby's skin
- Start with a few minutes of massage and gradually increase time
- Avoid prolonged pressure against the back of your baby's head and against the ball of his feet
- Massage can usually be done at any time except when your baby is hungry or straight after a feed
- Talk to your baby as you are massaging or exercising
- You can use a circular motion with your whole hand or use long slow strokes. You can also use your fingers or thumbs in a small circular motion.

Equipment not recommended for premature babies

Bouncinettes and suspended bouncers are not recommended for preterm babies because they encourage stiffening and arching postures.

Baby walkers are not recommended because they are not safe. They don't teach your baby to walk earlier and often encourage toe walking. This may make it difficult for your baby to walk in a natural way with his heels down.

Other useful resources:

Move Baby Move

www.npsr.qld.gov.au/community-programs/pdf/movebabymove.pdf

Ages and Stages – Children's Health Queensland

www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/PDF/publications/cychs-ages-stages.pdf

SIDS and Kids

www.sidsandkids.org

Swaddling Video

www.rch.org.au/kidsinfo/fact_sheets/Wrapping_your_baby_safely/

Always talk to your GP, child health nurse or physiotherapist if you have any concerns with how your baby moves.



This patient information brochure supports National Safety and Quality Health Service Standard 2 - Partnering with Consumers



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