

# Non-nutritive Sucking in Preterm Infants

*Babies born at term are usually able to coordinate sucking, swallowing, and breathing. However, for preterm infants, the skill of having a strong, coordinated suck develops over time. The goal is for your baby to have positive oral experiences sucking at your empty breast, their hand or dummy, while they mature and grow. This helps them get ready for successful breast feeding.*



Sucking without drinking milk is called “non-nutritive” sucking and it is your baby’s first step to learning how to breast feed well. It can help to strengthen your baby’s feeding muscles; lower your baby’s stress levels; provide comfort; and help your baby to be in a relaxed, alert state which is great for their development. With non-nutritive sucking practice time on nasogastric feeds is reduced, babies achieve successful suck feeding earlier and are ready for home sooner.

## **How will I know if my baby is ready for non-nutritive sucking?**

- > Your baby will be stable with handling
- > Able to keep their oxygen level, heart rate and body movements in a steady state during sucking practice
- > Show licking and movement of the mouth and lips
- > Have oral reflexes such as turning head and opening mouth when their cheek is touched gently (rooting reflex)

## **What can I do to help my baby practice?**

Time and regular non-nutritive sucking practice is the key to your baby’s readiness for feeding with milk. Ways that mums and dads can help are:

- > Hold your baby skin to skin as often as you can during their hospital stay
- > Wrap and position your baby so their hands can reach their mouth
- > Offer dummy for sucking practice when your baby shows licking or rooting
- > Watch and follow your baby’s cues. Stop if they look stressed
- > Be patient, sucking takes a lot of energy and effort for your baby
- > Talk about your feeding goals or questions with your nurse / midwife

## **Guide to feeding development of premature infants**

### *Less than 30 weeks gestation*

- > Holding your baby skin to skin is vital to their development
- > Your baby is able to smell your milk, stick out their tongue and have a few licks at the breast as you express some milk onto the nipple

### *30-32 weeks gestation*

- > Your baby may show interest in feeding by turning their head toward your breast and make sucking movements while having skin to skin. This is called the rooting reflex
- > Your baby is able to achieve a latch and begin to suckle. Brief sucking periods will be followed by long pauses
- > Follow your baby’s cues and allow for a restful period and skin to skin

*32-34 weeks gestation*

- > Your baby's muscles are still getting stronger and your baby will tire easily
- > The goal at this stage is practice and positive experiences with feeding - not to completely empty your breast or take a full feed
- > Your baby may show interest in feeding by turning their head toward your breast and make sucking movements while having skin to skin
- > Longer sucking bursts with repeated swallowing are seen
- > Having your baby remain skin to skin while the tube feed (gavage) top up is given can help with growth and development

*34-36 weeks gestation*

- > Your baby may begin to show hunger signs and make sucking noises
- > Your baby may latch and take longer sucking bursts
- > Your baby may feed better at some feeding times than others and from day to day. Please do not get discouraged by this as a premature baby needs time and patience to achieve adequate feeding
- > Choose times when your baby is alert and showing signs of hunger
- > Help your baby to pace and co-ordinate their suck-swallow-breathe pattern  
*This may mean you need to interrupt their feed by breaking their suck / seal to help them maintain their oxygen level*

*36 weeks to Term*

- > Your baby will continue to improve at the breast and will become coordinated in sucking, swallowing and breathing
- > As your baby grows, you will notice that they start to wake for feeds, improve at latching and more effectively empty the breast
- > Continue to help your baby to pace and co-ordinate their suck-swallow-breathe pattern. With your support, they will be better able to comfortably complete a full feed as they mature and grow

**Ways to access other breastfeeding information and support include:**

- > **Ask** to speak with a lactation consultant
- > **Call** the Australian Breastfeeding Association on 1800 686 268 or visit their website <https://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/bf-info/premature>
- > **Visit** the Raising Children website:  
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/premature-babies/breastfeeding/breastfeeding-premature-babies>

**For more information**

**Speak to your nurse/midwife**  
**Call – The Australian Breastfeeding Association. 180 068 6268**  
**Ask to speak to a Lactation Consultant.**  
**Women's and Children's Hospital (WCH)**