Your Baby’s Sleep in the NICU

Sleep is very important for premature babies. Sleep is a time of great brain activity and brain development! The brain of premature infants and an older newborn is more active during some stages of sleep than it is during their time spent in a more awake state.

Not all sleep for the premature infant is the same. Your infant needs plenty of deep REM sleep (also called restless sleep) for brain development. REM sleep only occurs with uninterrupted sleep, and only after the infant has first reached a deep sleep state. During REM sleep, vital sensory information is organized into meaningful and permanent brain circuits (or learning pathways and connections) that your infant will use throughout their lifetime to understand the world around them.

Sleep is also needed to:

- Regulate hormones (for brain development and physical growth)
- Store energy needed for growth
- Develop hearing, touch, vision, taste, and smell
- Learn and build memory
- Develop the limbic system (the brain’s center for emotional learning about new experiences)
- Preserve your infant’s brain capacity for future learning and the ability to adapt to an ever changing world

Learn more about your health care.
Tips to help your baby sleep

- Learn your baby’s sleep schedule. Visit whenever you can but check with your nurse about your baby’s wake-up time. Allow your baby to sleep undisturbed until then. If your baby is sleeping when you visit, get to know your baby by sitting and watching without touching.

- Warm your hands before touching your baby. Touch your baby slowly and gently, but keep steady pressure. Avoid stroking your baby. Keep your hands still until you are sure your baby will enjoy other kinds of touch. Just start by holding hands or cradling their head and bottom.

- Talk in a soft voice, shut the isolette doors gently and shade the baby’s eyes from bright overhead lights.

- Check with your nurse to learn how to swaddle or nest your baby. Support the baby’s arms and legs and bring the baby’s hands up near the baby’s face or mouth.

- Provide kangaroo care to your baby. Read the handout on Kangaroo Care for more information.

As your baby grows and matures during the NICU period the baby will begin to show gradual independence in the ability to eat, play and sleep.

Uninterrupted sleep helps:

- Promote brain development.
- Conserve energy.
- Decrease agitation and stress.
- Promote baby’s growth.

It may take several days to weeks for your baby to adjust from the busy, NICU to your quieter, less active home.

---

Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.