

Fact sheet

Your baby in hospital

When your baby has to be in hospital you are likely to have mixed feelings – feeling reassured that your baby is in good care, feeling worried about your baby and feeling uncomfortable and unsure in the new situation.

For babies, being in the strange situation of a hospital can be overwhelming, but there is much that you can do to help your baby cope with what is happening and also to get well more quickly.

Let's look at what babies need

For new babies everything in the world is new and often scary. They learn to make sense of this new world by having consistent care from one, or a very few people who care for them in the same way, and they learn to know the voice, the touch, the smell of loving care and to feel safe.

In hospital your baby will have lots of different nurses rostered for her care and this can slow down her ability to make sense of the world and what is happening. As well she will probably be feeling unwell and will have lots of new things being done to her – some of which may be painful.

What you can do

The best things to help your baby are to make things as similar to home as possible. You can do that by:

- > **telling/showing** the staff how you hold him, what he likes, what he doesn't like etc. You could make a card to put on the cot with your baby's likes and dislikes to help when staff change.
- > **bringing** favourite things from home eg blanket or rug, toy, and something of yours e.g. an old T-shirt that smells like you
- > **preparing** your baby for new things. For example if he has some equipment attached to him or being used with him. Introduce it slowly if you can. Show it to him. Talk to him gently about it even if he cannot understand the words, and give lots of reassurance first

- > **holding** him – if he is afraid of something, or new things which may be painful are happening, contact with your body while it happens, e.g. breastfeeding for something like an injection, will help your baby to cope
- > letting staff know when you are **leaving**, and let them know when you are coming back.

Most important of all, if you possibly can, **stay with your baby**. Even if it means making special arrangements for other children at home, it is worthwhile to make every effort to stay with your sick baby. If possible have another person who is very close to your baby, e.g. a grandparent, to share this with you so you can have breaks and your baby will still have a known and comforting person near. Most hospitals will let parents room in with very young children, and although it is not always restful to sleep in a babies' ward, sharing the care will help if you can.

Older babies

After the first few months your baby will be starting to know who the special people in his life are and is likely to be distressed when you leave because you are his safe anchor in the world.

What you can do

- > Again, if you can, **stay with your baby** you will be giving him the best support that you can. Share the care with another close person.



- > If you are unable to stay **make sure your baby has the things around him that are familiar** and that he loves. Leave something of yours as well.
- > Even though he doesn't yet understand the words, **talk to your baby** about what you are doing.
- > Make sure to **let your baby know when you are leaving**, so he learns to trust you. If he is upset when you leave, let a nurse know that you are leaving and ask her to comfort him.
- > **Try to visit as much as possible** – even if your baby is distressed when you leave it helps him to know that you are there. Don't let anyone tell you to visit less because your baby is upset when you leave. Coming back every time helps him to learn to trust you.

Caring for your baby in hospital

The best evidence about babies shows that they cope better and heal better when they are close to their parents' bodies.

- > Ask the hospital staff how much of the caring you can do. Ask if you can hold your baby while he is having any treatment that might hurt or be scary.
- > Learn to know your baby's cues or signs for what he needs - this will help you to respond to him.
- > Each baby is different but here are some common cues to give you an idea of what he needs.

Tired

- > Yawning and rubbing eyes
- > Grizzling
- > Jerky movements
- > Rubbing eyes
- > Grimace

Alert and ready to play

- > Being bright and alert
- > Looking at you and turning towards you
- > Hands being open and loose
- > Smiling
- > Reaching out to you

Need a break or change of activity

- > Frowning
- > Closing eyes
- > Looking away
- > Looking uninterested
- > Crying
- > Arching his back
- > Pushing away

There are some things you can't fix

Some things happen for babies when they are sick that you can't fix and sometimes your baby might be very distressed and sad and you won't be able to console her. At these times your baby needs you more than ever - to be with her and hold her if possible so that she knows that you are there caring for her in the tough times as well as the good times.

When you get home

Being in hospital is a major episode in her life. It will take time for her to learn to feel secure again when she gets home, and to get on with the business of growing and learning.

You can help your baby feel secure again by being there for her when she needs you, holding and comforting when she cries; understanding that she will be clingy for a while. You cannot spoil babies by responding to their needs or cries. When your baby feels secure again she will want to explore the world and learn new things, knowing that you are there if she needs you.

Take care of yourself

This is easy to say but sometimes hard to do, especially if you have competing demands on your time and love. However, to care for your family you need to be taking care of yourself – making time to do some things you like, even just a break with a cup of tea and a friend to talk to. This is the only way you can continue to give others what they need.



Resource in South Australia

Parent Helpline 1300 364 100

Reference

The Humane Neonatal Care Initiative
<http://www.hnci.ee/?show=home&lang=en>

For more information

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