

NURTURING IN THE NICU

January 2026



Thriving Babies ... Thriving Families

Our goal is
“Thriving Babies
and Thriving
Families”



Dear parents and families,

You make a big difference in your baby's development.

Your presence, touch and voice is an essential part of your baby's care in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

This guide offers many ways to be involved with your baby in NICU, and why it is important.

If you have questions and would like more instruction, please speak to your baby's NICU team.



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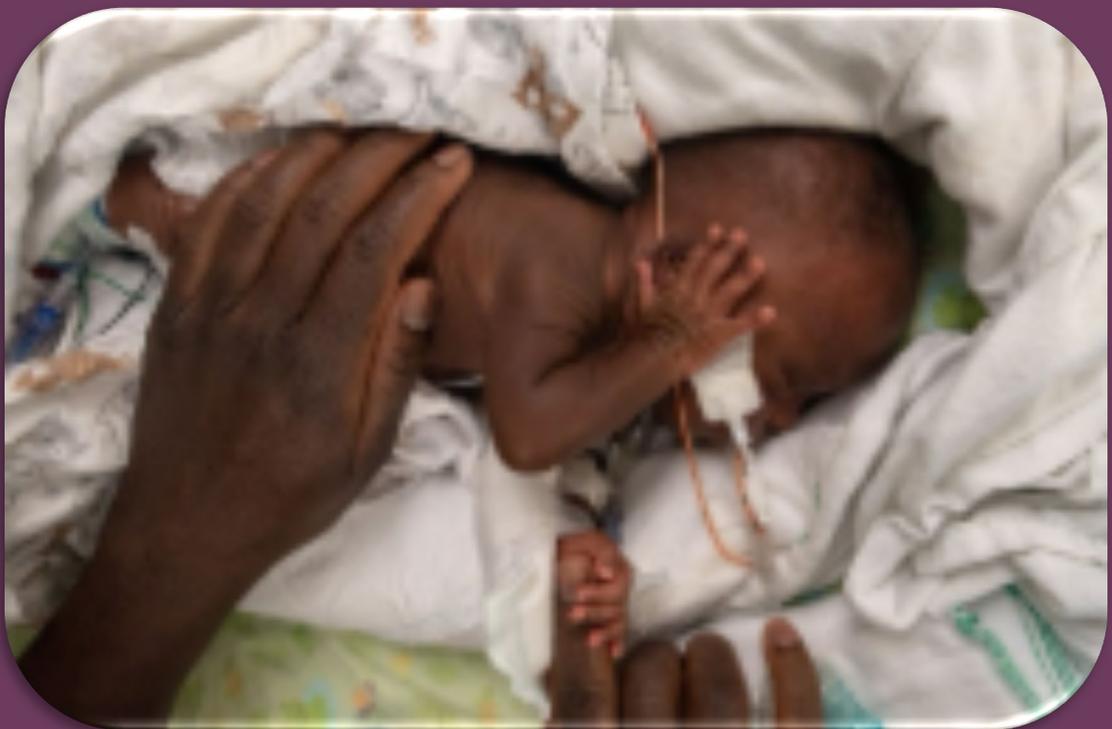
Kangaroo care is:

Holding your
baby so that
there is skin-to-
skin contact with
you.

It is the best
positive touch
families can
provide in the
NICU.



In this resource
any benefit and
use for kangaroo
care also applies
to hand hugs and
encircled holds.



Share kangaroo
care with your
baby for as long
and as often as
you can to get
the most benefit.

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Kangaroo care helps babies...

- Sleep better.
- Cry less.
- Grow better.
- Reach developmental milestones.



- **Breathe better.**
- **Breastfeed more successfully.**
- **Reduce infections.**
- **Feel less stress.**
- **Get home faster!**





Kangaroo care
benefits ALL
babies,
premature and
full term.

Kangaroo care helps moms ...

- Improve milk supply.
- Reduce post-partum depression.
- Feel stronger, more energetic, content, clear-headed and happy!

Kangaroo care helps parents ...

- Increase parent-baby bonding.
- Bond more deeply together.



Aim to make kangaroo care a daily routine for you and your baby.

Benefits continue at all stages of a baby's NICU journey.



The two most important things for NICU babies are their parents and kangaroo care.

Other family
members and
caregivers can
also learn
kangaroo care.



Continue
kangaroo care
from day one to
home and
beyond.

Touch and Sleep

Hand hugs
Encircled hold
Massage
Sleep
Awake time

Hand hugs

Wrapping your hands about your baby in bed helps them feel safe and comforted.



Encircled hold

Wrapping your arms around your baby in bed provides skin to skin contact for babies unable to come out of bed for a traditional hold.

Massage

Infant massage has many benefits and is great for babies older than 32 weeks gestation.



Sleep

Memory, senses, and emotional learning skills all require restful sleep to develop.

Learn your baby's awake and sleep state to help promote their sleep and know when to interact.

Awake time

When your baby wakes up during kangaroo care it is a great time to:

- Speak softly to them in your first language.
- Sing a song or read a book to them.
- Offer tastes of your milk or nuzzle.





Kangaroo care
is ideal support
for your baby's
development.

Taste and Smell

Taste and smell
are the first
senses your
baby develops.

By 28 weeks
gestation, your
baby can
recognize
familiar smells.



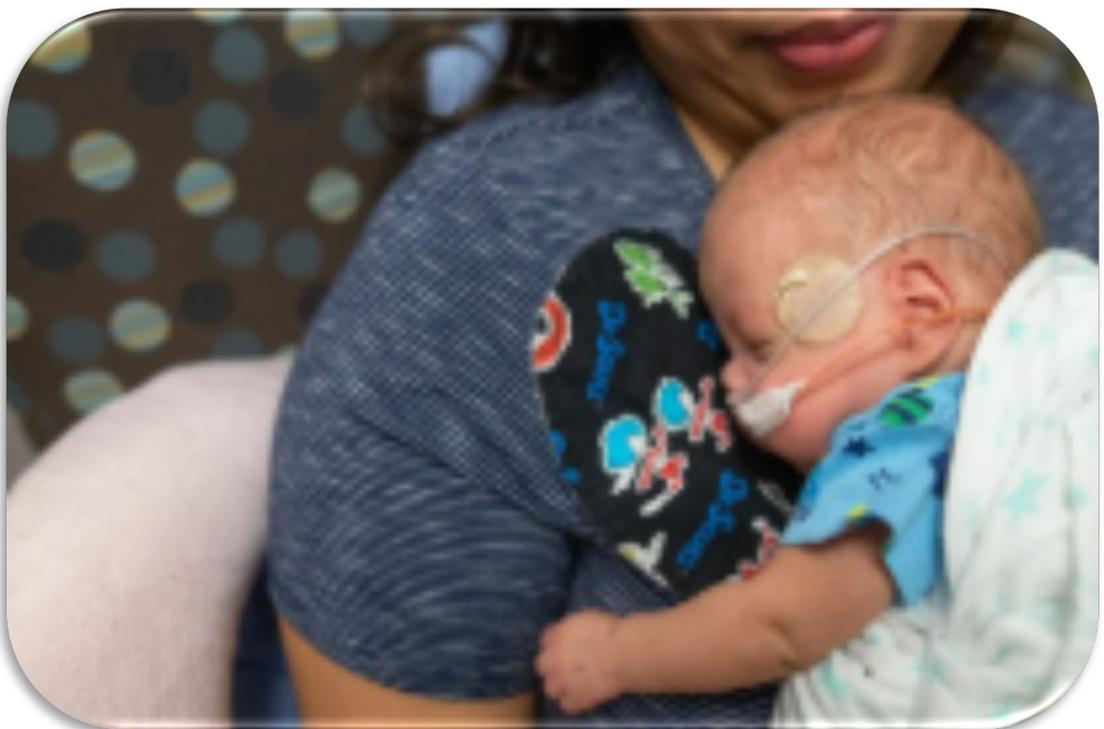
Taste and smell
can be a great
comfort to your
baby.

Positive tastes,
like breast milk,
act as a pain
reliever!

Scent cloths

Wear the cloth near to your skin to absorb your scent. Leave it next to your baby when you need to step out.

Avoid strong smells such as perfumes or smoke.



Oral Immune Therapy (OIT)

OIT is giving your baby tiny tastes of breast milk.

Benefits: build your baby's immune system, prepare their tummy for food and reduce pain and stress.



How to give OIT

- Place one hand very gently over your baby's chest, or arms.
- With the other hand, hold the taste at the corner of your baby's mouth.
- Wait for your baby to open their mouth.
- Introduce the taste into their mouth.
- Goal: Make it a welcome and positive experience.



Kangaroo care
helps your baby
learn your scent
and reduces
pain, stress and
ease their way
to eating.

Hearing and Vision

NICU is often
loud and bright.

Babies are
sensitive to light
and sound.

Your baby will
communicate
when they are
overwhelmed by
noise and light
through their
body language.

Hearing

The best sound for your baby is your voice.

Not sure what to say? You can read a story, sing a song or tell them about your day.

Please silence your cell phone and wear headphones when using your digital devices.

Vision

Preterm babies have immature vision.

We limit their exposure to light by keeping their eyes covered and room lights dimmed.



Vision

Babies' vision of shapes and faces becomes clearer as they approach their due date.

Until then premature babies see best if it is not too bright.



Kangaroo care
puts your baby
next to your
heartbeat...and
that's a beautiful
sound.

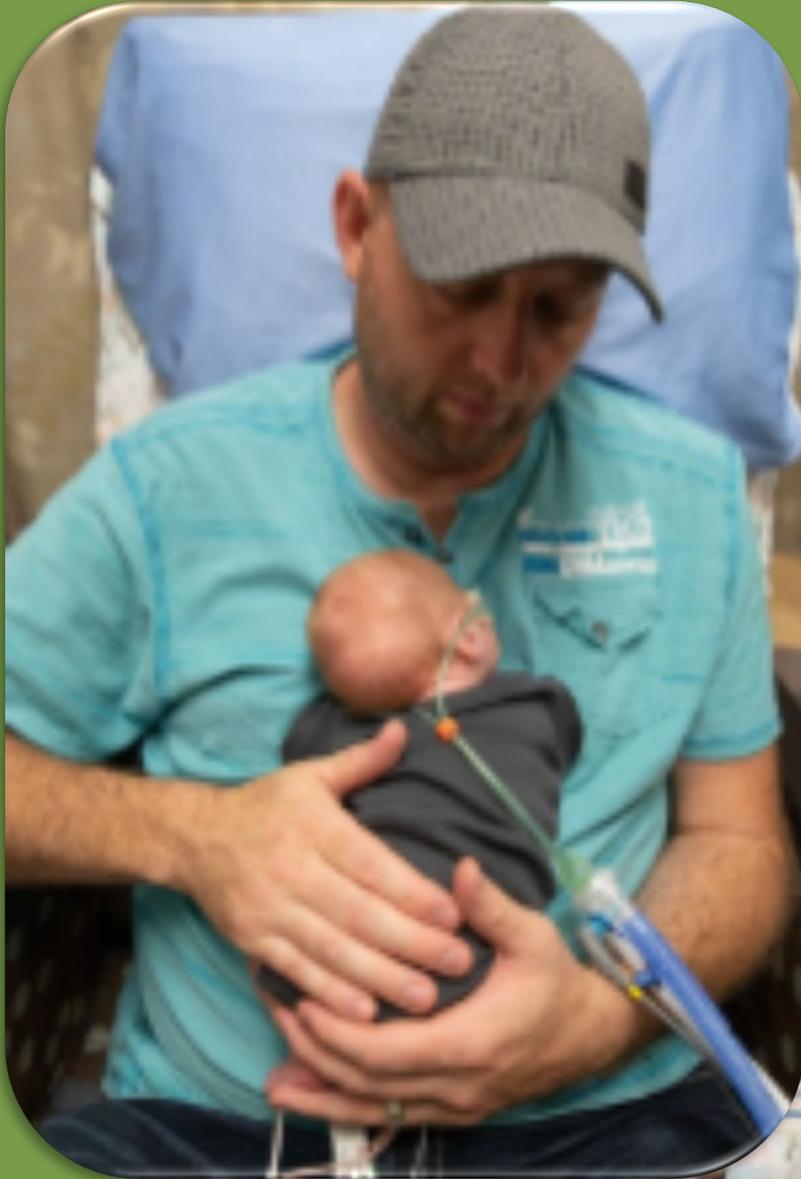


Stress and Pain

In the NICU, we
work hard to
reduce babies'
pain and stress.

Pain and stress
have a huge
impact on your
baby's
developing
brain.

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Positive touch

Strive for kangaroo care before, during and after stressful or painful procedures for your baby.

If you can't hold your baby in your arms, supporting your baby in a tucked position, with hand hugs or encircled hold are the next best thing!

Kangaroo care reduces pain and stress during:

- Routine NICU care.
- Diaper changes.
- Needle pokes.
- Tube care.
- Tape removal.



Breast milk

Sucking and taste decreases pain.

Tastes of breast milk or breastfeeding during routine care and procedures is an excellent way to decrease pain.



Sucrose

A sugar solution called sucrose is offered when breast milk is not available.

Sucrose or breast milk can be used in combination with kangaroo care to reduce pain.

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Comforting your baby



Talk with your baby's nurse daily to plan for upcoming procedures and care so you can be present and support your baby.



Parents you play an important role in comforting your baby.

You can improve your baby's experiences during procedures several ways:

- Start kangaroo care 10 to 15 minutes before a procedure and continue during and after procedures.**

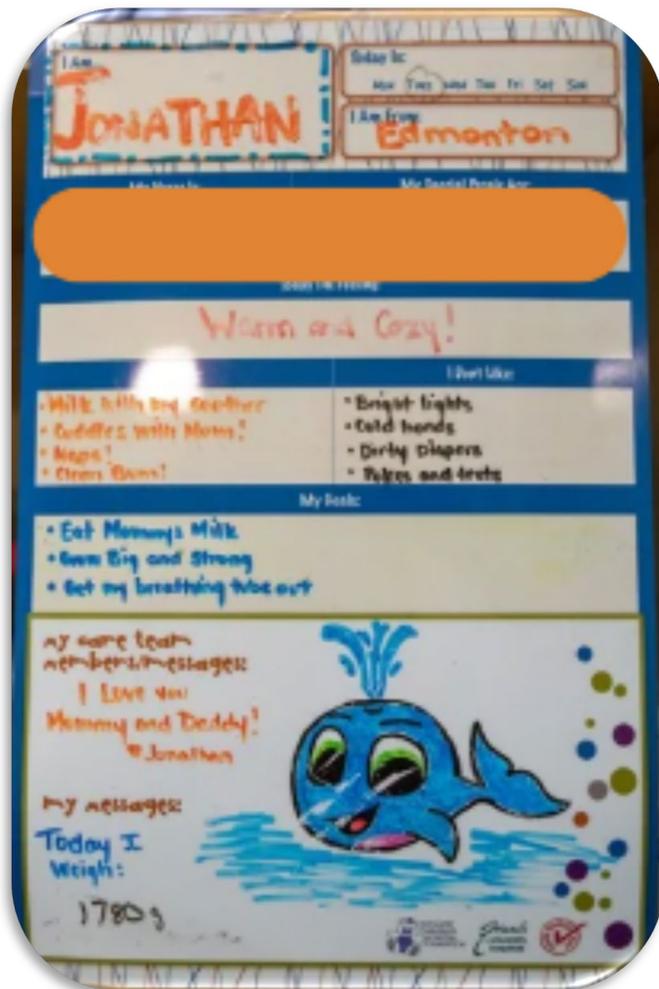
- Offer a pacifier
- Dim the overhead lights
- Talk or sing softly to your baby
- An older/more mature baby may settle with very slow, gentle rocking or swaying motions.



- If breastfeeding is an option, start 2 to 5 minutes before the procedure and continue throughout.



- Share your baby's individual preferences with the care team (include on the bedside whiteboard).



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Summary



You can help your baby by:

- **Doing kangaroo care as long and often as possible.**
- **Read, sing or talk softly to your baby.**
- **Change your baby's diaper.**
- **Provide positive feeding experiences.**
- **Provide breast milk, when available.**

- Learn and respond to your baby's cues.
- Attend and take part in daily bedside rounds.
- Include your baby's care preferences on their whiteboard.



More Resources



Healthy Parents, Healthy Children

Having a baby in the NICU is a stressful experience.

Ask your nurse or social worker about family support groups in your hospital.

Aim to get adequate sleep, drink and food.

Explore onsite wellness resources to go for a walk, get coffee, breathe.

- Family spaces
- Quiet room
- Healing garden



PFCC

Ask to speak with a member of our Patient and Family Centred Care (PFCC) team about encouragement and support in being active caregivers in your baby's care team.

Learn more at:

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/stollery/Page14041.aspx>

NIDCAP

Ask to speak with our NIDCAP (Newborn Individualized Developmental Care and Assessment Program) team for additional information regarding your baby's developmental journey.



Adapted with permission from Florida Perinatal Quality Collaborative

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Reviewed by:

- Philip C Etches NICU Brain Health and Wellness Working Group
 - Edmonton Newborn Individualized Developmental Care and Assessment Program (NIDCAP) Team
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