

# Your full-term baby's development

Babies learn new things every day through experiences and interactions with the world around them. Newborn babies benefit from gentle touch, hearing voices, gradual light exposure, and some other gentle activities and interactions as detailed below.

- **Touching and holding:**
  - Your baby's skin is mature but sensitive; be gentle when touching or stroking your baby's skin. Let your baby know you are around by speaking in a soft voice before you touch them
  - Touch your baby using gentle, steady pressure or rhythmic stroking. Hold your baby using a swaddling blanket to keep arms and legs close to his/her body
  - Talk to your baby's care team about holding your baby skin-to-skin every time you are in the NICU; this helps bonding and development, as well as increases mother's milk supply.
- **Infant feeding:**
  - When your baby is hungry, he/she will wake up, become active, root, and/or cry to let you know it's feeding time
  - Feeding skills are generally mature around due date, although some babies may need extra time to fully master the suck/ swallow/ breathe coordination
  - Going to mother's breast as soon as possible and deemed safe by your baby's care team will help establish breastfeeding. Your baby may be offered a pacifier or may suck on his/her fingers to calm him/her self – these experiences may help your baby's emotional regulation and oral feedings skills
  - Provide opportunities for your baby to smell a pad with mother's milk at feeding times if he/she require feeding through a feeding tube
  - Swaddle your baby snugly in a blanket during feeding. Avoid direct bright lights in your baby's eyes during feeding, and maintain a calm environment so your baby can focus on sucking, swallowing, and breathing
  - You will notice that your baby will start to accept and enjoy gentle social interaction (talking, smiling, singing) during feedings after 38 weeks gestation. Ultimately, the goal is for your infant to enjoy oral feedings as both a nurturing and a social experience which supports optimal growth and development
- **Infant states of activity:**
  - You will notice your baby going through different states: "alert and active", when your baby may be opening eyes, looking, and moving around; or "quiet", when your baby is awake, but calm and still; or "crying", when your baby may need to be soothed, fed, or changed. The "quiet and alert" state is the optimal period for



learning (through talking, reading, singing, playing with your baby). As babies grow, you will notice longer and more frequent periods of being “quiet and alert”; this is a sign of neurodevelopmental progress and maturation

- **Positioning and sleep:**
  - Sleep allows for brain and body growth and maturation. Wake up your baby gently for care and feeding times which should be around every 3 hours.
  - Your baby may be in a “therapeutic position” early on during their NICU stay, to best support their body functioning and healing. As your infant gets closer to being ready to go home, he/she will transition to “safe sleep” (sleeping on his/her back as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics)
  - Your baby will also have an emerging routine sleep pattern. The ultimate goal is that your baby will be awake and interactive more during the day and asleep more at night
- **Movement:**
  - Your baby should keep his/her arms close to his/her body in a tucked position most of the time; he/she will demonstrate a wide variety of smooth and controlled movements at this stage
  - Please talk to your baby’s nurse and physical therapist about which positions and exercises best support your baby’s body functions and development
- **Looking, listening and smelling:**
  - Your baby will show increasing periods of being awake, alert, and ready for social interaction and learning. Your baby will generally be able to focus on one type of stimulation at a time, such as, looking, or listening, or touch
  - Babies at this age generally show interest in human faces, and exploring their environment. He/she can see faces or objects best from about 1 foot away
  - Your baby gets the most benefit from hearing human voices rather than other noises around him/her
  - Establish routines/patterns of baby care, feeding, and other activities or interaction. Let your baby look at your face and encourage him/her to track faces and objects
  - Read to your baby every day you spend time with him/her. Every time babies hear words and language, their neurons (brain cells) connect which helps future thinking skills and general development
  - Children’s books are available in the parent lounge – feel free to take as many as you need. For more information, please see the “Reading to Your Baby in the NICU” handout.

