

Touching and holding your baby

All parents look forward to the time when they can hold their baby. Because your baby is in the NICU, you may not be sure when this will happen. Some babies can be held right away, while others are too sick to be held. If your baby can be held, try doing kangaroo care (also called skin-to-skin care). If your baby is too sick for you to hold her, there are still ways to gently touch her.

Kangaroo care

Kangaroo care is when you lay your diapered baby on your bare chest (if you're the father) or between your bare breasts (if you're the mother). Put a blanket on your baby's back to help keep him warm.

Kangaroo care may help your baby:

- Stay warm
- Keep his heart and breathing regular
- Gain weight
- Spend more time in deep sleep
- Spend more time being quiet and less time crying when he's awake
- Have a better chance at breastfeeding

Kangaroo care may help you:

- Make more breast milk
- Reduce your stress
- Feel close to your baby
- Help build your confidence to take care of your baby

Some babies can start kangaroo care soon after birth and some babies may need to wait. You can do kangaroo care with your baby even if he's connected to NICU equipment. Ask your baby's providers when you can start kangaroo care with your baby.



This resource includes some medical terms you may hear in the NICU. You can find out what they mean in the *Words to know* section at the end of this resource.

Here are some things to do before doing kangaroo care with your baby:

- Take a shower in the morning so you have clean skin and hair.
- Don't use scented lotions, deodorant or perfumes. Babies are sensitive to smells.
- Stay away from cigarette smoke. If you can't, change your clothes before you hold your baby.
- Go to the bathroom.
- Have a snack.
- Have a bottle of water nearby.
- Make any phone calls you know you need to make.
- Wear a shirt that opens in the front. Or ask your nurse for a hospital gown.
- Have a mirror close by so you can see your baby's face.
- Have a camera for the nurse or other family member to take a picture.

Research shows that doing kangaroo care for at least 1 hour is best. But you can do it for as long as you and your baby are comfortable. It's important to stay awake when you're doing kangaroo care.

You also can do kangaroo care with your baby at home. It's a wonderful way for parents and their babies to be close.

Gentle, still touch

If your baby isn't ready to be held, there are other ways you can be close to him. Gentle, still touch is very important, even for very sick babies.



One way to do this is to do hand hugs (also called a containment hold or hand swaddling). Place very light pressure on your baby's head with one hand and put your other hand on his tummy or gently cup his feet. When you touch your baby, don't stroke him. This can be overwhelming for babies.

Doing hand hugs can sometimes calm your baby when he's fussy. It also can make you feel better because you can see your baby breathing and being calmed by your touch.

Notes

Words to know

containment hold — This is a way to hold a baby. It's done by placing one hand lightly on the baby's head and the other hand on the baby's tummy or cupping her feet gently.

hand swaddling — See containment hold.

infection — An illness caused by some viruses, bacteria or other germs.

kangaroo care — Also called skin-to-skin care. Putting a baby dressed only in a diaper on his parent's bare chest.

NICU — Also called the neonatal or newborn intensive care unit. The place in the hospital where newborns go for special care.

premature birth — When a baby is born before 37 weeks of pregnancy.

skin-to-skin care — See kangaroo care.