

# Premature Newborn Care: Signs of Well-Being

While your baby is getting used to life outside the womb, he is working hard to tell the world who he is. As with all newborns, it will be some time before your baby is able to ask for what he needs. Until then, he communicates through his behavior.

It takes a little while to learn how your baby tells you what she feels and needs. But as it happens in every new relationship, you and your baby will be discovering each other day by day.

A baby's self-soothing behaviors include: bringing her hands or arms together at her chest; lifting his hands to his mouth or face; Looking away, or closing his eyes to shut out something stimulating; Sucking on a finger, hand or pacifier; bracing one foot against the other; or tucking her legs in close to her body.

These signs of wellbeing communicate a message to you. And they are clues to use in your care. Early on, the behavior you are likely to see most is sleep. And this is a good thing! It is while he is asleep that your baby's brain does the most growing.

Most of the body's brain growth and most of the healing from injuries occurs during sleep. So, it is important to foster sleep as carefully as we monitor your baby's nutrition or oxygen delivery.

Preterm infants rarely enter a "deep" sleep until they are closer to term age. And even then, episodes of sound sleep are likely to be brief.

But in "light" or "REM" sleep - when your baby's eyes are moving under closed lids, the brain is building foundations for further sensory development and later learning and memory.

Sometimes, it is hard to tell if your baby is asleep because, much the way she would have if she were still in the womb, she will move and stretch, pucker her lips, even smile, all the while in a light sleep.

And do not be surprised if your baby shifts into a more wakeful state momentarily - this does not mean, though, it is time for interaction.

Often a baby will be able to return to REM sleep, perhaps with some gentle containment from hand cradling or with some sucking to self-soothe.

If you find yourself wondering why your baby sleeps so much of the time, it is good to remember that full term infants also spend most of their day asleep. And in many ways, your sleeping baby is behaving the way he would have if he were still in the womb. He needs his sleep time for brain development.

Gradually, as his brain matures and your baby adapts to life outside the womb, you may notice moments of quiet, alert wakefulness when your baby's eyes appear bright and shiny, with his body staying still and relaxed.

Over the first days and weeks in the nursery, as you watch your baby express herself through her unique patterns of behavior you will discover the best ways to support her as she heals and grows.