Basic Baby Care: Information for Parents

It is important to understand how to care for your baby to meet his or her basic needs. Basic care activities such as diaper changes, cord care, and bathing are a good time for parent-baby interaction and will be part of your daily routine with your baby. While caring for your baby, you can talk and play with him or her. The nurses will help teach you how to care for your baby while in the neona- tal intensive care unit (NICU) so you are ready to continue caring for your baby when you go home.

# Elimination and Diaper Changes

Your baby will need his or her diaper changed several times a day. You should check your baby’s diaper often and with each feeding. The number of dirty diapers and poop consistancy depends on your baby’s feeding method.

* The first poop a baby has is called meconium. Meco- nium often is black and tarry and will last a few days.
* Formula-fed babies may have as few as one poop every other day, and poops may be pasty to semi- formed in consistency.
* Breastfed babies may have three or more poops a day and poop may be loose in consistency, like mustard mixed with cottage cheese.
* You can expect six to eight wet diapers a day.
* Clean the genitals daily and as needed with each dia- per change using unscented, nonalcohol-based, mild soap; baby wipes; or a washcloth and water. For girls, clean the genitals by separating the labia and gently washing and rinsing from the pubic area to the anus. For uncircumcised boys, gently wash and rinse the tip of the penis. When gauze is used for circumcised boys, it should be changed with each diaper to reduce the risk of infection. Use petroleum jelly to keep the ban- dage from sticking to the diaper.
* Secure the diaper with the tabs, making sure the dia- per does not cover the cord.
* Wash your hands after each diaper change.

# Cord Care

* Clean around the base of the cord, where it joins the skin, with soap and water.
* Keep the cord dry.
* You can expect the cord to fall off between 10–14 days after birth.
* If you notice signs of infection (foul odor, redness, drainage), report them to your baby’s provider or nurse.

# Bathing and Skin Care

Bathing gives you a chance to clean and observe the con- dition of your baby’s skin. Your baby’s skin is sensitive.

Use unscented, mild baby soap for bathing. A daily bath is not necessary, but you should clean the face, behind the ears, the neck, and the diaper area daily. While your baby is in the NICU, talk to your baby’s nurse if you want to give your baby a bath. The nurses will help you coordinate a time for the bath.

Here are some tips for giving your baby a bath:

* Make sure the room is warm and free of drafts.
* Gather your supplies (soap, washcloth, drying towel, receiving blanket, diaper, and clothes).
* Bring your baby to the bathing area when the supplies are ready.
* Never leave your baby alone on a bathing surface or in bath water.
* Water temperature should feel pleasantly warm to the inner wrist. Do not hold your baby under running water. The temperature can change and your baby could be scalded or chilled quickly.
* When sponge bathing, undress your baby and swaddle in a towel with the head exposed. Uncover the parts of the body you are washing, taking care to keep the rest of your baby covered to prevent him or her from getting cold. Wash, rinse, and dry each part of the body.
* When tub bathing, position your baby on his or her back in the tub with just enough water to touch the chest.
* Start by washing your baby’s face. Do not use soap on the face. Wet the washcloth. Wash around the eyes from the inner edge of the eye (by the nose) to the outer edge. Use a separate part of the washcloth for each eye. Report any eye drainage to your baby’s nurse or provider.
* Wash the rest of the face. Clean the ears and nose with the washcloth. Do not use cotton-tipped swabs because they can cause injury.
* Add soap to the washcloth and wash the body with soap.
* Lift your baby’s shoulders to expose the back of the neck (be sure to hold the head) and clean between the skinfolds. Gently lay your baby on his or her back and lift the chin to expose the front of the neck. Clean between the skinfolds.
* Wash the arms and legs and be sure to clean between the fingers and toes.
* Wash the chest and back. Be sure to support the head and neck.
* Wash the diaper area last and be sure to clean between the skinfolds.
* To wash the baby’s hair, wrap your baby in a warm towel with the head exposed. Hold your baby in a foot- ball position supporting the head and neck with one

hand and using your other hand to wash the hair with soap. Rinse soap completely and dry with a towel.

* Unscented, nonalcohol-based lotion may be used after bathing. Ask your baby’s provider or nurse for sugges- tions on skin care products.
* Newborn fingernails and toenails are usually soft and flexible. You should use a nail file or emery board to shorten and smooth the nails once a week or as needed. This is the safest method.

# Clothing

Dress your baby as you would dress yourself. Add or take away clothes as necessary. Your baby’s clothes should be washed separately using an unscented, mild laun-

dry detergent to protect his or her sensitive skin. Your baby also is prone to sunburn and should be kept out of direct sunlight. Ask your baby’s provider about the use of sunscreen.