



# Basic Baby Care

Basic baby care incorporates the daily routines of elimination, cord care, and bathing. It is an essential part of discharge education, but it includes a lot of information that may overwhelm parents. When teaching basic care, it may be a good idea to break up the content and set priorities by following the parents' cues.

## Elimination

Elimination patterns will be determined by breastfeeding or formula-feeding patterns of the infant. It is important to be aware of elimination patterns to distinguish problem signs from normal elimination. Normal elimination includes six to eight voids per day. Changes in the color and consistency of the stools will depend on feeding type. Formula-fed infants will have fewer stools compared with breastfed infants. The stools of formula-fed infants are pasty to semifformed; breastfed infants' stools will be looser, with some consistency in the texture. Instruct parents to cleanse the genitals daily and with diaper changes, noting any skin irritations. Infrequent diaper changes and diarrhea can contribute to diaper rash, so diapers should be checked often. Over-the-counter zinc oxide ointments may be used if diaper rash is noted.

## Cord Care

The umbilical cord should be kept clean and dry. In recent years, the use of triple dye and alcohol for cord care has been shown to prolong separation time. Signs of infection should be noted with each diaper change, and the cord should fall off around 10–14 days after birth. A granuloma is often seen once the cord separates, appearing as a small, raw, red polyp. The granuloma may need to be treated with silver nitrate by the infant's provider if it does not heal on its own.

## Bathing and Skin Care

Bathing is an opportunity to observe the infant's skin condition. Daily bathing is not recommended because it alters the skin's pH, disrupts the integrity of the skin, and

may cause excessive dryness. The infant's age will determine if a sponge bath or tub bath is appropriate. All infants should be sponge bathed until their cord falls off and heals.

Unscented, mild baby soap (avoid alkaline soaps) should be used for cleansing the skin to protect the pH. The newborn's skin has an acid mantle that is formed from the epidermis, superficial fat, and amniotic fluid, which can be a medium for bacterial growth when altered by alkaline soaps. Steps to prevent heat loss are an important part of bath time. If the infant is stable, immersion bathing is appropriate and has been found to lessen heat loss as well as crying. Developmental bathing, in which the infant is swaddled while in the tub, with only one body part unwrapped at any one time, is recommended for premature infants. Dry the infant immediately after bathing to prevent further heat loss.

Bathing is one of those tasks that allows parents to bond with and get to know their infant. This increases parental feelings of competency and confidence and will lower overall anxiety. Bath time is also a good opportunity for parent-infant interaction. Parents should talk to their infant and engage their infant in play activities.

## Clothing

A common concern parents have is how to dress their infant. It is best to recommend that parents dress infants as they would dress themselves. Keep in mind that overdressing may cause overheating and is linked to increased risk of sudden infant death syndrome, and an uncovered head leads to excessive heat loss in cold weather.

## Bibliography

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## 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 your baby. We want you to care for your baby while in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) so you are ready to continue caring for your baby when you go home. The nurses will help teach you how.

### 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 bowel movements and stool consistency depends on your baby's feeding method.

- Formula-fed babies may have as few as one bowel movement every other day and poops may be pasty to semiformal in consistency.
- Breastfed babies may have three or more bowel movements a day and stools 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 diaper change using unscented, non-alcohol 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 a 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 bandage from sticking to the diaper.
- Secure the diaper with the tabs, making sure the diaper 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.

- Do not bathe your baby in a tub until the cord falls off and is healed.
- You can expect the cord to fall off between 10–14 days after birth.
- Inspect the cord for signs of infection (foul odor, redness, drainage) and report them to your baby's provider.

### Bathing and Skin Care

Bathing gives you a chance to clean and observe the condition of your baby's skin. Your baby's skin is sensitive. Use unscented, mild baby soap for bathing. Sponge or spot bathing is often done until your baby's umbilical cord falls off and heals. As your baby gets older, you can give your baby a tub bath. A daily bath is not necessary, but you should clean the face, behind the ears, neck, and 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. As you bathe, wash, rinse, and dry each part of the body.
- If 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 wash cloth. Wash 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.
- If the hair is to be washed, you may wrap your baby in a warm towel with the head exposed. Hold your baby in a football 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, non-alcohol-based lotion may be used after bathing. Ask your baby's provider for suggestions 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 laundry detergent to protect his or her sensitive skin. Your baby is also prone to sunburn and should be kept out of direct sunlight. Ask your baby's provider about the use of sunscreen.