

FEEDING IN THE NICU

Introduction to Oral Feeding

Feeding - The Ultimate Goal

- ▶ Before you can take your baby home from the NICU, he/she needs to be able to eat well and safely.
- ▶ He/she needs to have enough energy and skill to take enough milk or formula from breast and/or bottle in a 24 hour period to gain weight
- ▶ Feeding in the NICU is a long and complicated process and technically starts the day they are born.
 - ▶ Many of the experiences your baby has throughout his/her life can affect their ability to eat well and continue to eat well once you graduate and go home.
 - ▶ You have been learning and will continue to learn that sensory input via light, sound, smell and touch are the stepping stones to success later in life. This includes feeding.

Feeding in the NICU

- ▶ Feeding in the NICU Is CoMpLiCaTeD!!!!
- ▶ Feeding is often one of the most involved activities you and your baby will be learning during your stay in the NICU.
- ▶ It is important to remember to be patient and let your baby guide their learning.
- ▶ Although there are things we can do to help when an infant is struggling we cannot force a baby to learn to eat and if we do, it will only lead to even worse outcomes in the NICU or down the road.
- ▶ If we foster your baby's learning from day one, chances of a smooth and successful outcome are good.

Terms Associated with Feeding

- ▶ Some of these terms you should be familiar with from other learnings, but they apply to feeding as well, and are important to repeat here:

Demand/Ad-Lib Feedings:

Feeding your baby based on cues he/she gives you that they are hungry, rather than feeding him/her on a fixed schedule

Disengagement Cues:

Cues from your baby telling you that they are not ready for the nipple, or that the feeding should be stopped. Cues can be sleepiness, limp arms and legs, milk pooling in their mouth.

Nippling Readiness Cues:

These are cues to look for telling you that your baby is ready to eat or is enjoying the feeding. This can include rooting at the nipple, putting their hands to mouth, moving around more before feeding time.

Gavage Feedings:

When breast milk or formula is delivered to the stomach by a soft tube that is passed through the mouth or nose into the stomach.

Kangaroo Care:

Holding your baby skin to skin. This can help your body make more milk, and help your baby learn how to feed.

Touch Aversion:

This is when your baby shows fear of being touched or having items placed in their mouth. This is because your baby's brain is not able to sort out different sensations yet.

Pre-Oral:

When your baby is not ready for pacifier or bottles to be placed in their mouth.

Non-Nutritive Sucking:

When your baby is able to suck on a pacifier or finger.

Nutritive Sucking:

When your baby is able to eat milk by bottle or breast.

Feeding in the NICU

- ▶ Keep in mind:
 - ▶ It can be very hard for preemies to learn to feed. Your preemie may not have the reflex for sucking and swallowing yet.
 - ▶ And the tricky part is they need to be able to suck, swallow and breathe in a steady pattern for a long period of time.
 - ▶ As your baby grows and matures, they get better at feeding.
 - ▶ Some days your baby will do better than others as they learn to feed. This can be hard for you as they have good days and bad days.
- ▶ Be Patient and don't lose hope.

Quality vs Quantity

- ▶ Historically, feeding programs have been based on a volume driven approach where the success of the feeding is based on the volume taken by the infant.
- ▶ Most NICUs have now adopted infant driven/cue-based feeding programs which have resulted in infants gaining more weight and achieving full bottle feedings faster than the outdated volume driven approach
 - ▶ Our unit has been on the leading edge of adopting cue-based feeding skills for many years!

Quality of a Feeding:

This is how well your baby feeds, and how your baby looks while they are feeding. Are they alert and actively engaged in feeding, or are they sleepy and floppy?

Quantity:

How much milk your baby eats when they feed.

Quality vs Quantity

- ▶ In this NICU, we focus on QUALITY not quantity!
- ▶ This means:
 - ▶ It is more important that the baby has a good experience, feels safe, trusts that the caregiver is going to respond to their cues, and is enjoyable.
 - ▶ It is less important how much milk your baby takes each time.
- ▶ If we are patient and provide safe and enjoyable feedings, the amounts will increase as your baby is ready

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Nippling Stages

- ▶ You will hear your nurse (RN), occupational therapist (OT), or speech therapist (ST) talk about nippling stages.
- ▶ These are stages your baby will go through as they learn how to feed from your breast and/or a bottle.
- ▶ Babies may jump back and forth between nippling stages as they learn to feed. Sometimes this may feel like they are going backwards, but it is part of their learning.