Managing your baby's pain

Information for families

Seeing your baby is in the hospital can be a frightening experience that leaves you with many questions and concerns. One important question parents often ask is, *Does my baby feel pain?*

The answer is yes — it's almost impossible to avoid. However, a lot can be done to help your baby feel better.

This handout can answer some of your questions and help you understand what you and your baby may experience.

Who are my baby's healthcare providers?

- Doctors, nurse practitioners, and nurses
- Respiratory, speech, occupational, physical, music, and developmental therapists
- Lactation and child-life specialists
- Pharmacists
- Social workers
- Discharge planners and case managers

Partners in caring

While you are by your baby's side, remember that you and your baby's healthcare providers are partners in caring for your baby. You may notice which sights, sounds, or positions make your baby feel more comfortable. These things can be added to your baby's plan of care. As you and your baby's healthcare providers share information about what is happening, together you can provide the best possible care for your baby. Here are some ways you can work together:

What you can expect from YOUR BABY'S HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

- **Do everything possible** to manage your baby's pain and keep side effects to a minimum.
- **Explain what kind of pain is involved** when your baby has a test or procedure, and explain how the pain will be treated.
- **Explain the risks, benefits, and side effects** of your baby's pain medications.
- **Listen** when you report that your baby is in pain.
- **Assess your baby's pain regularly.**
- **Work with you** to set a pain management goal for your baby.

How YOU can help

- **Speak up.** Don't be afraid to ask questions.
- **Ask again if you need to.** Because you're under a lot of stress, you may need to ask the same question more than once. That's okay!
- **Talk with your baby's healthcare providers** about the treatments your baby is receiving and what your baby may experience. Ask about the options.
- **Ask before handling your baby.** At some stages of illness your baby may do better with less handling. Let your baby's healthcare providers guide you through this difficult phase.
- **Be a partner** with your baby's healthcare providers. You can help provide the comfort measures that are appropriate during each phase of hospitalization. You can help set a pain management goal for your baby.

What can cause my baby's pain or discomfort?

A number of things can cause your baby pain, including:

- Surgery
- Tests to diagnose your baby's condition, such as drawing blood from a vein or heel stick, eye exams, or spinal taps
- Certain illnesses
- Procedures to treat your baby's condition, such as being connected to a mechanical ventilator, placement of IVs, or insertion of urinary catheters, feeding tubes, and chest tubes
- Injuries from birth
- Constipation and gas

How will I know if my baby is in pain?

As soon as your baby was admitted to the hospital, healthcare providers began to check for signs that your baby might be in pain. They continue to check for pain regularly, treat any pain, and see how well the treatments are working.

Since your baby can't say what hurts, healthcare providers look at a number of signs to help determine how much pain your baby is feeling. They compare these signs to a scale to give your baby a "pain score." Your healthcare providers can show you how this is done.

Signs of pain can include:

- Crying and irritability
- Facial expressions such as grimacing, or eyes squeezed shut tightly with bulging of the brow
- Tense, stiff arms and legs, kicking, or arching the back
- Becoming limp
- Changes in heart rate, breathing rate, need for oxygen, and erratic breathing patterns
- Lack of interest in feeding or interaction
- Inability to sleep, rest, and eat

How will my baby's pain be treated?

Treatments can consist of a combination of the following:

- Medications given through an IV, by mouth, or applied to the skin
- Other methods, such as:
  - Giving oral sucrose
  - Encouraging your baby to suck on a pacifier or on his or her hand
  - Changing your baby's position, or gently holding your baby's arms and legs close to the body
  - Slow, gentle movement, or soft touching
  - Decreasing stimulation by reducing the amount of light and noise in the room

While these other comfort methods can help reduce your baby's pain, they may not be enough to treat severe pain. Your healthcare providers will consider your baby's type of pain, treatments, procedures, and gestational age to make sure they choose the best ways to control your baby's pain.

When should my baby be given pain medication?

Your baby's healthcare providers will choose carefully when and how to give pain medication. You can talk with them about these choices.

Does my baby really need pain medication?

- **If your baby is in pain** it's important to give pain medication. Pain that is not treated can delay healing, decrease weight gain, and increase the time your baby has to stay in the hospital.
- **If your baby is upset but not in pain**, pain medication may not be necessary. There are many ways to comfort your baby, such as changing your baby's position, distracting your baby with something to look at, decreasing the amount of light in the room, or offering a pacifier.

How do my baby's healthcare providers know when to give pain medication?

Your baby's healthcare providers look at the signs listed on the previous page, and decide if pain medications or other interventions are needed. They'll check your baby regularly while in the hospital.

Will my baby become addicted to pain medication?

Newborns, both full-term and pre-term, do not become addicted to pain medications in the same way some adults do. They may, however, develop tolerance so a greater amount of medication is needed to treat the pain. They may also become dependent on certain medications and have side effects after the medication is reduced or stopped. Your healthcare providers can manage these.

What kind of positioning helps my baby?

The way your baby is positioned can help him or her feel more comfortable and cope with the environment. This can also help your baby grow and develop in the best way possible. Your healthcare providers will teach you about important positioning techniques used in your baby's care, such as:

- Swaddling
- Boundaries
- Nesting
- Hands close to face
- Flexion

As you and your baby's healthcare providers learn what positioning techniques and other comfort measures (such as pacifier, music, or mobile) help your baby calm him or herself, these will be added to the plan of care.

Positioning your baby

Swaddling

Boundaries

Nesting

Hands close to face

Flexion

What is a pain management goal?

The information in this handout will help you understand how your baby's pain is treated. It's important to know, however, that successful pain management may not take away **all** of your baby's pain. The goal of pain management is to reduce the pain enough that your baby can rest and can do the activities that will prepare him or her to leave the hospital. To help make the best plan for your baby's care, you and your baby's healthcare providers together will set a "pain management goal."

A pain management goal has three parts:

1. **Your baby's comfort.** Your baby needs to have the things that normally make him or her comfortable. These can include self-comforting activities, such as sucking on a pacifier on his or her hand, grasping, changing position, or bringing hands close to the face. Symptoms that make your baby uncomfortable, such as reflux, also need to be managed.
2. **Your baby's ability to function.** There are certain things your baby needs to be able to do in order to get better. These can include breathing well, eating, sleeping enough, and interacting at the right level for his or her age.
3. **Your baby's current pain score.** Healthcare providers will look for signs that your baby is in pain. A score will be given according to the signs your baby displays. Many babies can recover with a pain score of 3 or less.

Given the above, what would allow your baby to recover? Every baby tolerates pain differently, and is comforted by different things. You and your baby's healthcare providers will decide this together. **This is your baby's pain management goal.**

A pain management goal helps you and your baby's healthcare providers know if the pain treatments are working well. If your baby is not comfortable enough to do what is needed to recover, the healthcare providers may make changes to your baby's pain management care. They will do everything possible to help your baby be comfortable.

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