

Helping your Baby Cope with Painful Medical Procedures

All newborn babies will have a few painful procedures in early life. Babies have blood taken by heel prick for the newborn blood spot screening tests soon after they are born, then a series of immunisations over the first few months. These procedures may hurt babies a little, but they also give you as a parent the chance to learn how to help your baby cope when they have pain.

Can babies feel pain?

Yes. The nervous system is one of the first to develop. Babies born as much as 3 months early will be able to feel pain. Babies may be more sensitive to pain than adults because their nervous system is still developing.

How do babies respond to pain?

You can usually see when a baby is in pain by looking at their face. When babies have pain they often show a 'pain face'. They squeeze their eyes together with a bulging brow and deep creases appear between their nose and the corners of the mouth. Their mouth is often open wide and square shape and the tongue is cupped.

Crying is the main way that babies let us know that they need our attention. You can often tell the difference between a baby crying from hunger or a wet nappy and a baby crying because they are in pain. Crying in response to a sudden pain may have a high pitch and come in short loud bursts. But if pain lasts a long time, the cries may become weaker or less frequent.

Babies usually react to pain with **increased movement** of their arms and legs, clenching their fists and wiggling their body. Your baby may also have jerky movements, become stiff, or go limp if the pain is severe or lasts a long time.

When babies are in pain, for example after some immunisations, they may have restless sleep and wake up more often. Some babies might sleep more and be

drowsy when awake. They might also be too tired or upset to feed, or want constant suckling without seeming to be satisfied.

When parents and babies are well-prepared for a minor procedure, the baby may hardly react at all

Before the procedure.

Help your baby to be calm. Babies who are already fussy or crying will become even more upset by the pain of the needle. It will help if your baby has fed within the last hour (but not just before the procedure).

Remain calm. Your baby will react to your tension and anxiety. Seeing your baby in pain can be stressful. Keep calm by telling yourself that these procedures are necessary for your baby's well being and you are doing everything you can to help your baby. If you feel yourself getting tense or anxious, breathe slowly and deeply and relax your jaw and posture.

Hold your baby against your chest or wrap your baby snugly using a blanket to support and stop them moving around too much. Swaddling will also help to relieve pain by gently stimulating the nervous system. Check to see that this is helping your baby feel secure. If not, check if the swaddling is too tight or too loose.

Shade your baby's eyes from bright lights and turn down loud noises as these can make your baby more upset. This may be easier to do if you are at home (newborn screening test) than if you are in a busy surgery or clinic, but maybe you can find a quiet place in the clinic or ask people to speak softly.

Talk to your baby in a soothing voice, telling them what is happening and how they are being helped. They may not understand but will be comforted and distracted by your voice. Humming or singing softly may also calm your baby.

During the procedure

Offer your baby something to suck. Babies can learn to calm themselves by sucking on a finger, hand or dummy (pacifier). Offering your baby a dummy before, during, and after any painful procedure is a good way to reduce pain. Offering your baby a dummy only when they have a painful procedure will not interfere with breastfeeding.

Distract your baby by talking to them, giving comforting touch, and getting them to look at you. Help your baby control their movements by gently bringing their hands together, below their chin.

After the procedure

Rocking can be soothing to babies. If your baby is upset and crying, rapid rocking (and patting) may help to settle them quicker. If you find that your baby gets more upset, slow down or stop. Slower, large, smooth movements create a steady soothing feeling and can help a baby get to sleep. You may also want to **feed your baby** as this often helps to calm them.

Your baby's nurse, doctor or health visitor may have other ways of helping you and your baby to prepare for and cope with a painful procedure. They may suggest warming the heel before the newborn screening test or using a cold spray or numbing cream on the skin where the immunisation will be given. If you find these methods helpful, ask for them again if your baby needs more procedures.

Want to know more?

www.gosh.nhs.uk/cpap/resources/links.html

www.childrenshealth.org.uk

WellChild Helpline: Tel 0845 122 86 36, Email: helpline@wellchild.org.uk, Text: 0778 147 2599

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