

## Clinical Guideline: Mouth care

- Authors:** East of England Benchmarking Group members
- For use in:** EoE Neonatal Units  
Guidance specific to the care of neonatal patients.
- For use in:** East of England Regional Neonatal Units
- Used by:** Healthcare professionals giving direct care to neonatal patients
- Key Words:** oral, mouth care, oral mucosa, oral cavity, lips, feeding experiences, flavour, maternal antibodies

**Date of Ratification:**

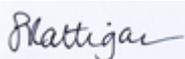
**Review due:** January 2022

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**Approved by:**

<p>Neonatal Clinical Oversight Group</p>	
<p>Clinical Lead Mark Dyke</p>	

I confirm that this guideline has followed due process for guideline development and has been approved on the above date by the Clinical Oversight Group and subsequently ratified at the ODN Board on the date stated. S. Rattigan, Neonatal ODN Director.



**Audit Standards:**

1. There is an evidence-based assessment tool used for mouth care
2. There is information and education to support parents in meeting the mouth care needs of their infant
3. Mouth care is continually evaluated and reassessed
4. Practice is benchmarked annually, and action plans formulated

**1. Scope**

For use in neonatal units within the East of England ODN

**2. Purpose**

- To inform practice in order to maintain a clean and comfortable oral cavity by effective mouth care procedures.
- To ensure that effective oral care is maintained in all babies who are unable to orally feed.
- To introduce early flavour experiences for babies, especially those who are nil by mouth or exclusively fed via gastric tube.
- To enable staff to educate and support parents in meeting the mouth care needs of their babies.

**3. Background**

The mouth is a crucial orifice for eating, drinking, taste, breathing, speech, communication and the immune system<sup>1</sup>. A functional oral cavity is the first line of defence against infection<sup>2</sup>. Dry and cracked lips can harbour pathogens because the barrier is reduced.

Assessment and delivery of appropriate oral care refreshes the mouth, keeps the mucous membranes moist and can reduce distress and discomfort as well as prevent potential infections<sup>3</sup>. In addition, oropharyngeal administration of colostrum may provide potential immune therapy for ELBW infants and decrease incidences of NEC and sepsis (<sup>11, 4</sup>).

The early sensory experiences of high-risk neonates are drastically different from those of a typical infant. Neonates who are fed via gastric tube do not have the same opportunities to experience flavours and traditional feeding behaviours. Therefore, providing oral care with milk for babies can introduce and develop some early positive taste and smell learning experiences<sup>5</sup> and achieves the same benefit of coating the oral mucosa that the infant who is breast or bottle feeding receives<sup>6</sup>.

Using the mother's own colostrum or breastmilk during oral cares is inexpensive and well tolerated by even the smallest and sickest ELBW infants<sup>8, 9, 12</sup>. It also provides positive experience for the parents. Providing oropharyngeal colostrum is associated with increased rates of feeding with breast milk (<sup>7</sup>).

#### 4. Risk factors for poor oral health in a neonate

- Nil by mouth status
- Restricted oral intake / gastric tube feeding
- Respiratory support
- Oral suction
- Antibiotic therapy
- Oxygen therapy
- Muscle relaxant /sedation
- Diuretic therapy
- Tachypnoea
- Drugs that can induce dry mucosa – morphine, steroids

#### 5. Breast milk use for mouth care

- NICE guidance and Specialist Neonatal Quality Standards promotes the support of mothers to express breast milk and establish lactation<sup>6</sup>.
- Colostrum and breast milk have unique properties which promote babies' health and development, including maternal antibodies and anti-inflammatory substances which offer protection against disease and infection<sup>10</sup>.
- Nurses should advise parents of babies who are unable to be enterally or orally fed, about the value of breast milk, particularly in relation to its anti-infective and anti-inflammatory properties to the vulnerable newborn.
- Babies are thought to recognize the taste of their own mother's milk and the familiarity can provide comfort to the newborn<sup>14</sup>.
- Freezing and then thawing breast milk can decrease its cellular and host defence properties<sup>15</sup>, therefore it is advised that fresh EBM is used in preference to EBM that has been frozen and then defrosted. Refrigerating EBM can also reduce some of the anti-infective properties of EBM but not as significantly as freezing<sup>15</sup>.
- Nurses should request that mothers bring their fresh colostrum to the neonatal unit, in order to be able to start using it for oral care prior to freezing.

**Additives such as fortifier should not be used in milk for oral cares.  
If breast milk is not available, sterile water can be used instead.**

## 6. Assessment

All babies on the neonatal unit should be considered eligible for oral care, as studies have so far shown that even the sickest, smallest babies; including those who are nil by mouth or ventilated benefit from moistening the lips and removing any coating<sup>9</sup>.

Mouth care with colostrum or EBM (when available) should be introduced as soon as it is available after birth. Staff should check for any contraindications for giving a baby colostrum e.g. maternal HIV infection or specific medications.

To enable appropriate mouth care, suited to the individual needs of the baby a thorough oral risk assessment is required. This assessment represents the vital first step in planning oral care. The use of a risk assessment tool (Appendix 1) enables a consistent approach to decisions about the timing of mouth care.

Each baby should be risk assessed (Appendix 1), at the beginning of each shift. This will enable the practitioner to decide on the frequency of the mouth care required. However, this may need to be reassessed during the shift.

The condition of the mouth should then be assessed with each mouth care (Appendix 2) to provide an outcome measure for the quality and effectiveness of mouth care interventions. This will also highlight problems at an early stage.

## 7. Equipment

- Baby's own fresh EBM/sterile water
- Cotton tipped applicators/gauze
- Non-sterile gloves if required
- Waste bag

## 8. Method

It is part of the nurses' role to facilitate family-centred care, therefore, whenever possible, oral care should be performed by the family/carer.

1. Assess that the baby's clinical condition is stable enough to receive mouth care.
2. Ensure baby is awake. Aim to perform mouth cares with EBM prior to a tube feed, to promote the association of tasting milk at feed time.
3. Carry out thorough hand hygiene, as per Trust policy.
4. Prepare equipment ready for use.
5. Check that the baby's milk or sterile water is in date. If breast milk, ideally this should be freshly expressed and not taken from the stock of milk used for feeding<sup>3</sup>.

6. If the infant requires suction this should be carried out before the mouth care is performed to remove secretions from the oral cavity.
7. It is vital that mouth care is a positive experience for babies, in order to counterbalance the many negative experiences they have and with the aim of reducing the risk of oral aversion. Carers and staff should therefore be guided by the baby's behavioural cues throughout mouth cares, pausing to allow the baby to recover from any periods of instability and only continue if the baby is able to maintain homeostasis.
8. Dip a cotton tipped applicator/gauze in the milk/sterile water and squeeze lightly, to remove excess liquid. Use this to clean gently and slowly around the oral cavity, paying particular attention to the gums, palate, tongue and buccal mucosa (lip & cheek lining). Using a 'dab and roll' technique is preferable to wiping, which can be too tickly and over-stimulating. Repeat until clean, provided the baby is tolerating the procedure. Never re-dip a used swab into a sterile water bottle / container of milk as this will contaminate the liquid with bacteria.
9. With a fresh applicator/gauze gently apply milk/sterile water over the lips using the same dab and roll technique to freshen and remove any coating. Repeat if lips are very dry or coated. This acts as a lubricant and helps to prevent breakdown of the surface tissue, increasing the baby's comfort.
10. Discard any used equipment.
11. Wash and dry hands thoroughly to prevent potential spread of infection.
12. Document the mouth care assessment score (Appendix 2) to indicate the condition of the mouth prior to mouth care, and that care has been given. Document the baby's tolerance to the procedure and any comforting measures provided.
13. Escalate any concerns to the Doctor and record in medical notes.
14. For babies receiving suck feeds, the frequency of oral care will be significantly reduced. Babies' lips may still become dry, so nurses and parents can continue to use gauze or a soft cloth for oral care.

## 9. Parental Education

Oral care is a prime example of one of the procedures that can be offered and taught to parents on the neonatal unit<sup>13</sup>. Nurses should encourage parents/carers to participate in early involvement on the neonatal unit to provide family-centred care, ensure that parents are involved in their baby's plan of care and prepare for them discharge home. Parents should also:

- Be guided towards written information on oral care and its importance, in paper format or a reputable internet source.
- Receive demonstration from nurses in the delivery of oral care to their infant, appropriate to gestation and clinical condition.

## 10. Audit

Audit will be through annual benchmarking activity and consequent action planning using infant's records to assess quality outcomes and guideline adherence. Poor scores may necessitate more frequent audits to ensure progress is being made.

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### Mouth Care Assessment Tool

<b><u>Risk Assessment Tool for Mouth Care</u></b> (Undertaken once per shift & documented according to local documentation) <b>0 = low risk 9 = high risk</b>	
Ventilated, CPAP or Flow Driver	0 = no 1 = yes
Ventilated period	0 = ventilated < 1 week 1 = ventilated > 1 week
Paralysed	0 = no 1 = yes
Sedated	0 = no 1 = yes
Oxygen requirement	0 = no 1 = yes
Feeds via gastric tube or NBM	0 = no 1 = yes
Fluid restricted	0 = no 1 = yes
Antibiotics	0 = no 1 = yes
Candida =/- receiving antifungal	0 = no 1 = yes
<b><u>The Risk Assessment will determine the frequency of mouth Care</u></b> <b>0 = no mouth care required</b> <b>1- 4 = 6-8 hourly mouth care</b> <b>5-8 = 4-6 hourly mouth care</b> <b>&gt;8 = minimum of 4 hourly mouth care</b>	
<b><i>If your risk assessment or assessment of the mouth score = 0 and yet mouth care is still <u>needed</u>, then please put the score in the care plan and write next to it why mouth care was needed</i></b>	

## Appendix 2

<b>Assessment of the Mouth</b> Undertaken at each mouth care (Score written on chart where mouth care indicated & care plan)		
<b>Lips</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>0 = smooth, pink, moist</b> <b>1 = coated, dry or cracked</b> <b>2 = ulceration or bleeding</b>
<b>Tongue</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>0 = pink, moist papillae</b> <b>1 = coated/shiny + &gt;/&lt; red appearance</b> <b>2 = blistered or cracked</b>
<b>Oral secretions</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>0 = minimal (no oral suction)</b> <b>1 = moderate (oral suction)</b> <b>2 = copious (&gt; 4<sup>0</sup> suction)</b>
<b>Consistency of oral secretions</b>	<b>Observation</b>	<b>0 = clear and clean</b> <b>1 = thin &amp; mucoid</b> <b>2 = thick &amp; discoloured</b>

**Adapted from:** Jiggins M, Talbot J (1999) **Mouth Care in PICU.** Paediatric Nursing Dec/Jan;11(10):23-26

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## Exceptional Circumstances Form

Form to be completed in the **exceptional** circumstances that the Trust is not able to follow ODN approved guidelines.

Details of person completing the form:	
Title:	Organisation:
First name:	Email contact address:
Surname:	Telephone contact number:
Title of document to be excepted from:	
Rationale why Trust is unable to adhere to the document:	
Signature of speciality Clinical Lead:	Signature of Trust Nursing / Medical Director:
Date:	Date:
Hard Copy Received by ODN (date and sign):	Date acknowledgement receipt sent out:

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