

University Hospital of North Staffordshire  
Neonatal Unit  
Non-Nutritive Sucking  
The use of dummies in sick and preterm babies

### Information for breastfeeding mothers

Before babies are born they practice feeding, by sucking their fingers and by swallowing the fluid that surrounds them in the womb. When a baby is born early s/he may need some extra help to learn how to feed.

Allowing a baby to suck without taking milk is known as non-nutritive sucking (NNS). S/he can practice suckling without having to co-ordinate swallowing with breathing. NNS is offered during a tube feed to allow a baby to exercise the muscles s/he needs to use for sucking. Suckling will also stimulate the production of digestive enzymes not normally stimulated when tube feeding alone. The baby learns to associate sucking with the feeling of a full tummy and may gain weight more quickly. The extra sucking practice may also help to reduce the time s/he spends in hospital.

Your baby can also learn to suckle directly at the breast, while being tube fed. This method is described as 'dry' breastfeeding. This involves expressing milk which is then tube fed to your baby while your baby suckles on an emptied breast. In this way, your baby will learn to associate suckling with a full stomach.

When your baby show s/he can co-ordinate suckling and swallowing with breathing you can partially express before a breastfeed to trigger 'let-down' so your baby gets the milk without too much effort. The next step is to put your baby to the breast without expressing first.

Another alternative is to offer your baby a dummy. However, there is some evidence that offering healthy term babies a dummy may interfere with breastfeeding. It is not known whether or not offering dummies to preterm babies causes any problems with breastfeeding, although it is possible that prolonged dummy sucking may interfere with the baby's ability to display feeding cues. However, whenever a mother is unable to be present and the baby is not ready for cup feeds you may feel that offering NNS with tube feeds is a useful option.

Dummy use on the Neonatal Unit is very specific as part of the feeding regime and will not be used indiscriminately or for long periods of time. In sick and premature infants the careful use of a dummy may have advantages for the babies which outweigh any possible disadvantages.

Sucking on a dummy can also have a calming effect and may reduce discomfort during painful procedures.

Parents have very different views on dummy use. Your permission will be sought for your baby to have NNS as part of the feeding regime and / or to be used as a comforter. Your wishes will be respected whatever you decide to do. If you have any queries or concerns please ask any of the nursing staff who will be able to answer any questions you may have.

As your baby begins to take more oral feeds at around 33 weeks gestation, the use of the NNS dummy will no longer be appropriate in most cases, unless the baby's clinical condition indicates otherwise.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.