The benefits of baby massage

Premature babies and massage
Having a premature baby can be a very stressful experience. As parents, you may feel that you should be the ones caring for them rather than the doctors and nurses. Baby massage is a way in which you can get involved with your baby’s care and help them and you feel better.

Baby massage can help your baby feel more relaxed. It can be especially supportive for babies who have experienced painful medical procedures. Your baby’s first experience of touch may have been very unwelcoming, which makes your loving touch all the more important.

What is baby massage?
Baby massage can be a way to get to know your baby and can give you a greater sense of confidence as a parent. It offers a way of communicating, playing, care-giving and sharing for the wonderful journey of life ahead.

It is never too soon to start baby massage, as long as your baby’s medical condition allows. In the early stages after birth, or if your baby is extremely poorly, it may be necessary to use a more subtle approach such as contact holding.

For more information, download our Bliss Parent Information Guide

A small number of neonatal units introduce baby massage while babies are still in hospital, but if this is something that was not practised on your unit it’s not too late to begin when baby comes home.

Before starting any massage on your baby while they are in hospital, it is very important that you check with the nurses or a qualified (IAIM- International Association of Infant Massage) baby massage instructor that your baby is medically stable enough.
**Baby massage can help with bonding**

When you imagined having a baby, you might not have imagined that you would be separated from him. If they are premature or sick it’s most likely that this will happen. This can mean that it may take a little longer for you to form a connection with each other. Baby massage can help encourage this special connection between you. This link to you can be strengthened in your baby through all his senses, such as your smell, hearing your voice, and feeling your loving touch. It’s a way for you both to communicate with each other and to build that special bond that will remain with you throughout life.

**Hormones and how these can help relax you and your baby**

There are special ‘chemical messengers’, also known as ‘hormones’ in your baby’s body and your own that can also help to strengthen the special connection described above. The main ‘hormone’ is called oxytocin. Oxytocin is released in our bodies when we give or receive pleasurable touch, especially from those that we love. Oxytocin can make you and your baby feel good. It can reinforce or encourage the feeling of closeness that parents may feel is missing because their baby was born too soon, too small or too sick.

For mums it can increase breast milk production. It can also help you to stay calm so you become more in tune with your baby’s feelings, especially his need for comfort and understanding. Baby massage and skin-to-skin contact (kangaroo care) can increase the levels of oxytocin in you and your baby.

**Baby massage can lower stress levels**

There are also chemicals in our bodies that can increase when we are under stress. The main one is called cortisol. Daily massage in medically stable premature babies has shown to lessen their cortisol levels. Baby massage can be a positive way for you to help de-stress your baby and yourself.

**Baby massage can help keep your baby calm and contented**

By massaging your baby you can help keep them calm and contented. This will assist them in adjusting their breathing, helping him to become less agitated or stressed. It will help them calm down, use less energy (so more can be used for growing & healing), sleep better, shut down from too much noise or light and be comforted more easily. By helping your baby to be more calm and contented you can help them to be more stable heart and relax their breathing rate. You may also notice a rosier colour in their cheeks and a greater ability for them to take their feeds well. All of these elements are commonly referred to as being in an ‘organised state’. This organised state will help provide the best conditions for their brain to develop as normally as possible.

The safest touch is done with respect for your baby’s ‘needs’ and ‘signs’. For example, signs that show that your baby may need some ‘time out’ or a break, might include yawning, sneezing or hiccups. Give your baby plenty of time, lots of pauses with a resting still hand, and if the signs continue, stop and try again another time.

For more information, download our [Look at me I'm talking to you! leaflet](#)
Baby massage can help them to achieve this ‘organised’ state. It also provides a way for you to tune into your baby’s needs, likes and dislikes.

**Baby massage can help your baby’s physical development**

The healthiest way for the bones to grow and develop is by gently helping your baby’s joints and muscles to move. Babies in special care can spend a lot of time tucked up lying on their tummy or back as they do not have the capability to move themselves. They rely on staff or parents to move and change their position. Sometimes, due to this lack of movement, they can suffer from a medical condition called osteopenia of prematurity. This means that they lack the vital bone minerals needed to strengthen the bones.

By having a baby massage routine, which can include gentle exercises, you can lessen the possibility of your baby developing osteopenia of prematurity, as long as their nutritional needs are also met.

Many research studies have shown that of baby massage in stable and premature or sick babies can help:

- Improve weight gain
- Help the baby to become more organised
- Allow the baby to be more alert, so he can interact with you and others
- Help start oral feeding earlier (rather than tube feeding)
- Result in baby being discharged from hospital earlier
- Promote healthier bones

Baby massage can lay the foundations for your baby’s emotional development and encourage love, trust and intimacy between you both.

Further advice, support and publications can be requested by phoning our Family Support Helpline on freephone **0500 618140**. The line is open from 9am to 9pm, Monday to Friday. You can also email us at **enquiries@bliss.org.uk**