

Recognizing and Responding to Your Baby's Stress Signals



Premature babies are very sensitive to the environment and any changes in it. Your baby may be exposed to stress-causing procedures during the NICU stay. The very premature baby has an immature nervous system and may find loud noise, bright lights, strong scents and stroking to be stressful or even painful. By recognizing your baby's signs of stress, you may be able to respond more quickly to your baby's needs.

Here are some signs that your baby is stressed:

- Changes in skin color (baby may become pale, especially the nose, flushed, or blue)
- Changes in vital signs including heart rate, respiratory rate, oxygen saturation
- Yawning, sneezing, gagging, hiccups
- Decreased muscle tone or limpness
- Frantic or flailing movements, arms and/or legs extended and locked
- Finger splaying (the STOP sign)
- Grimacing, looking panicked
- Glassy eyes, "tuning out", looking away, averting gaze
- Irritable and difficult to console

How can you support your baby and reduce his stress?

- Approach your baby first by speaking in soft, soothing tones. Follow by cupping your baby's head and feet firmly but gently in a hand hug without stroking. Remove your touch slowly and gently.
- Have your nurse turn on the giraffe's heated air curtain when you plan to open the portholes so that your baby is not exposed to cold air. Open and close the portholes silently.
- Protect your baby's eyes from bright light with your hand, a scent cloth, or diaper.
- Support your baby in a tucked position when the nurse needs to perform a procedure such as inserting a feeding tube or drawing blood. You may swab your baby's mouth with breast milk beforehand to give added comfort.
- If your baby is displaying signs of stress, stop or slow what you are doing.
- Lift your baby by the hips, not the feet, during a diaper change to prevent pressure to the belly.
- Do Kangaroo Care with your baby as soon as possible. Plan to spend at least an hour so your baby gets all the benefits Kangaroo Care has to offer. Please wear clothing that opens in the front so your baby can be easily positioned against your bare skin. We can also give you a hospital gown if that is easier.
- Talk to your baby's nurse if you see any behaviors that you find unusual or distressing.