

What is non-nutritive Sucking?

Non-nutritive sucking is the sucking that babies do when there is no milk to swallow.

This happens at the beginning of breast feeding before the letdown, at the end of the feed and when babies suck on their fingers, pacifiers or toys.

It occurs at a rate of about 2 sucks per second, in bursts of 6 or 8 sucks at a time.

Babies do this because they have a desire to suck and it is an important way of exploring the world around them. Sucking also helps sooth and calm baby.

What are the benefits of non-nutritive sucking?

- Helps tube fed babies keep the association between sucking and a full stomach. That is, it builds associations between positive sensations in the mouth and hunger satisfaction
- Aids the transfer to nutritive sucking on the breast / bottle
- Improves oral muscle tone and co-ordination
- Helps calm baby and therefore conserves energy
- Has been shown to shorten hospital stays and aid weight gain
- Babies have higher oxygen saturation levels throughout feeding
- Helps digestion and has been suggested to help babies that reflux

“Non-nutritive sucking in preterm infants would appear to have some clinical benefit. It does not appear to have any short-term negative effects”.

Pinelli / Symington. Cochrane Review 2000

When should Non-nutritive sucking happen?

- Babies can be given a pacifier or a parent’s clean finger to suck on:
- If they are awake, alert and settled during a tube feed
- If they are awake, alert and settled outside of a feed time (together with containing baby in a centred and flexed position)
- During and after painful procedures

As well as non-nutritive sucking try using a variety of toys and textures around the baby’s face and mouth. Use things such as:

- Flannel (wet and dry)
- Soft toys
- Wooden or (plastic toys)
- Woollen blanket

Gently brush the texture over the baby’s hands, arms and then face including the forehead, cheeks and lips.

How often can Non–Nutritive sucking occur?

- Several times per day –whenever baby is awake, alert and settled
- Maximum of 5 minutes at a time
- Initially baby may only suck for 30 seconds. This will increase over time with practise
- Stop if baby shows you signs of stress including: splayed hands, clusters of sneezes and/ or goes to sleep
- Quality is more important at this time than quantity

As babies grow they spend more time awake-looking listening, reaching, making sounds and

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exploring the world around them. They will spend less time sucking but will continue to mouth objects.

What to use?

Use your little finger-pad side down on the tongue. Be sure that you have clean hands and your nails are cut short.

When sucking your finger encourage baby to hold your hand/fingers as this promotes further calming.

An empty breast.

A pacifier - be sure that it fits your baby's mouth.

If you have any questions or queries discuss this with your nurse or the Speech Language Therapist.

If your baby is not yet making strong sucking movements, ask your nurse to arrange for the Speech-Language Therapist to see you and your baby.