

The benefits of touch for babies, parents

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Skin-to-skin time in the first hour after birth helps regulate the babies' temperature, heart rate, and breathing, and helps them cry less. It also increases mothers' relaxation hormones. Credit: iStockphoto

For babies, the nine months of pregnancy may feel like one long, loving embrace. It's not surprising, then, that studies support the benefits of skin-to-skin contact for mothers and babies from the moment of birth, throughout infancy and beyond.

Experts at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital recommend that expectant mothers incorporate immediate skin-to-skin contact with their babies as part of their birth plan.

"Even for babies born by cesarean section, skin-to-skin time right after delivery can be a wonderful, strong start for both mother and baby," said [obstetrician](#) Susan Crowe, MD, director of outpatient breastfeeding

[medicine services](#) at Packard Children's.

When the health of mom and baby allows, postponing the normal protocol of bathing, weighing and testing the baby can clear the way for shared skin-to-skin time.

"During this time, babies experience nine instinctive stages: birth cry, relaxation, awakening, activity, resting, 'crawling' (a shifting movement toward the breast), familiarization, suckling, and sleep," said Crowe, who's also a clinical assistant professor of [obstetrics and gynecology](#) at the School of Medicine. "For a mother who desires to breastfeed, supporting skin-to-skin time is one way we can help her reach that goal."

Depending on each mother's birth plan and medical needs, skin-to-skin time with baby offers benefits, whether the baby was born vaginally or by cesarean section, whether it happens in the first hour or when mom is medically ready, and whether or not she is breastfeeding. Skin-to-skin time in the first hour helps regulate babies' temperature, [heart rate](#), and breathing, and helps them cry less. It also increases mothers' relaxation hormones.

A 2012 study published in the journal *Neonatology* showed that 95 percent of mothers who spent skin-to-skin time were breastfeeding exclusively 48 hours after delivery, and 90 percent were still breastfeeding exclusively six weeks later.

Babies and mothers with special medical needs also benefit from skin-to-skin time, when it becomes medically possible. In the meantime—and beyond that point as well—the mother's partner can provide skin-to-skin time with baby, which can help keep baby warm and provide bonding time.

As babies grow, infant massage provides a natural next step to continue this bond and its benefits. "Infant massage is always about bonding, loving and respect," said Maureen McCaffrey, a certified infant massage instructor at Packard Children's. "We start by asking permission, and then listen for the baby's cues to see if they're engaging or disengaging. Babies communicate with us from the moment they're born through body language, sound and behavior."

In her classroom, McCaffrey sets up a nurturing environment that's an easy, safe and relaxing example to parents. "The environment is very important. Parents can begin to feel the benefits just by setting up a quiet, relaxing space where massage will take place," she said.

McCaffrey teaches a variety of infant massage techniques tailored to the unique needs of babies and families and focuses on the shared benefits. Following is just a sampling of benefits that infant massage can provide:

- Enhance babies' awareness of being loved, accepted and safe.
- Improve sleep patterns for babies.
- Improve digestion and elimination for babies.
- Reduce fussiness for babies and increase their comfort in their environment.
- Improve neurological function in babies.
- Increase weight gain for premature and full-term babies.
- Increase lactation production for mothers.
- Reduce postpartum depression for mothers.
- Improve relaxation for both baby and parents.

From the first cuddle to the lasting bond, [babies](#) and parents can benefit enormously from learning their "first language"—touch—creating a strong start toward a lifetime of nurturing affection and good health.

Provided by Stanford University Medical Center

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