

# How to support your baby's development

## Cardiac occupational therapy

**Information on how to support your baby's  
development, in hospital and when you leave.**

Occupational therapy helps babies with motor, cognitive, and sensory processing skills, such as supporting their heads, sitting, and grasping toys. These are the skills they need to explore their world and learn.

Some babies and toddlers with congenital heart defects need therapy support because their development is at risk of becoming delayed. This can be from a combination of becoming tired easily, or being in hospital for a long time.

If you are concerned about any part of your baby's development, please ask your nurse to contact the cardiac occupational therapist.

## Handling

The breastbone is the bone in your chest that all your ribs connect to. If your baby has had an incision (cut) through their breastbone (sternotomy) or ribs (thoracotomy), they will need to be carefully handled for 6 weeks after surgery. This is to allow time for their wound to heal.

- Do not lift them underneath their armpits.
- Use a scoop technique to pick them up, supporting underneath their bottom and their head and neck.



## Stimulation

Babies learn through their senses, and explore their environment through movement, touch, smell, sight, sound and taste.

After surgery your baby might need a short period of rest while they are recovering but it is important, once they are medically well enough, to start stimulating your baby. Give them a variety of toys and textures to allow them to explore, and talk and sing to them.



## Positions to support your baby's development

### Head preference

Sometimes babies can develop a head preference and look more towards one side. If this happens, make sure you approach your baby from **both** sides of the cot.

For example, if you notice your baby is always looking to their right side, then approach them from the left side of the cot. This will encourage them to turn their head to both sides, and visually fix and follow faces and toys.

Some babies develop a preferred position. It is important for your baby's development that they play in a variety of positions post-surgery. Select a few of the positions below to work on each day when your baby is alert and ready to play.

### **Lying on their back**

There are no special precautions you need to take when nappy changing after surgery, but make sure you handle them carefully.

Encourage your baby to bring their hands in front of them and to their mouth. Encourage them to make eye contact and follow your face. Support your baby to explore small light toys. Present 1 toy at a time to prevent over stimulation.

### **Lying supported on your lap**

This is a good position to work on your baby bringing their hands together, and reaching their hands towards their feet. It will also help to develop their visual and hearing skills.

### **Side lying**

Lie your baby on their side. You can use a rolled-up towel or blanket behind them at first, to support them to stay in this position. Work

towards your baby being able to stay on their side without the support of a towel.



Encourage your baby to bring their hands in front of them. This is an important developmental stage and they learn to explore and self soothe. It will be easier for your baby to bring their hands together while lying on their side than on their back. Encourage your baby to make eye contact and follow your face. Support them to grasp and explore light toys. They might need your help at first.

### **Sitting**

It is good for your baby to spend short periods of time sitting up to develop their head and trunk control. This also improves their alertness and helps their recovery. You can use a baby bouncer or a tumble form chair, if you have been issued one after advice from your therapist.

Make sure you check with the staff nurse that your baby is medically ready to sit upright. They should not sit in the chair for any longer than 30 minutes at a time. If they start to look tired or slumped, or go to sleep, remove them from the chair.

As the number of infant seats available in the hospital is limited, we strongly encourage parents to bring in their own seats.

### **Tolerance for positions for play**

Sometimes it can take your baby time to get used to new positions. Moving them slowly, and stimulating them in these positions will build their tolerance, allowing them be in the position for longer.

## **Safe sleeping**

Always put your baby on their back when sleeping, and not on their side or front. Do not leave rolls or toys in the cot when your baby is sleeping. See The Lullaby Trust for more information on safe sleeping.

## **Tummy time**

Tummy time is an important position which helps to strengthen your baby's neck, trunk and shoulder muscles. If you have the chance to work on tummy time with your baby before their cardiac surgery this is helpful.

Encourage your baby to turn their head to both sides, towards the sound of your voice and motivating toys.



**Only work on tummy time when your baby is awake and alert. If they fall asleep, turn them over onto their back.**

## **Positions after cardiac surgery**

### **Babies**

Your baby can start tummy time 1 to 2 weeks after cardiac surgery, when they are comfortable and the chest wound is healing. Check with your baby's doctor or nurse before starting tummy time, to make sure the chest wound is healing.

Tummy time should then be started with careful handling. Avoid lifting them up underneath their armpits, and support them underneath their bottom, and back. Make sure they have clothes on, to protect the wound.

## **Toddlers**

Avoid activities where your toddler pushes or pulls heavy objects, or pulls themselves up on furniture to a standing position.

Avoid activities where your toddler lifts their arms above their head.

## **Car seats**

Some young babies have breathing and circulation instability in car seats. Babies who are part of the Home monitoring programme will be assessed by nursing staff to make sure that their circulation is stable enough to travel in a car seat.

A car seat challenge is completed on the ward, and your baby will have to sit in their car seat for 2 hours.

If your baby cannot safely complete the car seat challenge, a referral to occupational therapy might be needed, to review your child's posture and explore different car seat options.

If your baby's car seat is unsuitable and they need extra postural support, you can get advice from reliable websites.

## More information

Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA),  
**web:** [www.childcarseats.org.uk/](http://www.childcarseats.org.uk/)

### Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about your baby's development after cardiac treatment, please  
**email:** [gst-tr.otchildrenselch@nhs.net](mailto:gst-tr.otchildrenselch@nhs.net)

For more information on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **web:** [www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets](http://www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets)

### Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS),  
**phone:** 020 7188 8801 **email:** [pals@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@gstt.nhs.uk).  
To make a complaint contact the complaints department  
**phone:** 020 7188 3514 **email:** [complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk](mailto:complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk)

### Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please contact the department your appointment is with.



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