

Coping with separation from your baby on the Neonatal Unit during coronavirus (COVID-19)

This leaflet gives information about coping with separation from your baby on the Neonatal Unit (NNU) if you have been asked to reduce or stop visiting during the pandemic. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to the neonatal psychology team, or a doctor or nurse caring for your baby.

Being separated from your baby for any length of time can be extremely difficult - it doesn't matter if they have just been born or are a few months old. Separation from your baby is one of the main causes of distress for parents with babies in neonatal units. You are not alone in feeling the way you do. All neonatal units try to reduce the amount of time you are separated from your baby, and try to give you opportunities to help care for them and build your relationship.

The extra challenges of coronavirus might mean that you are having to stay away from the unit while you recover from being unwell or are in isolation. We know that this is very distressing and brings other feelings, such as anxiety and yearning to be with your baby. You may also have concerns about bonding and attachment. We hope this leaflet helps you during any extended time away from your baby.

Your emotional connection to your baby

Lots of parents worry about forming a bond or making an emotional connection to their baby on the Neonatal Unit. There are lots of reasons why this might be more difficult for some people. For example, being surrounded by medical equipment and worries about your baby's survival can make bonding harder. You may have felt a connection very quickly, and separation may feel very difficult when it is for a longer time.

It is important to remember that this connection, along with feeling like a parent, develops over time. In whatever situation you are in you should remember that bonding is a process. It is strong, flexible and will keep developing over time..

Lots of parents think that they are 'letting their baby down' or that they 'should be there for their baby'. Remember that you are doing everything you can in a unique and difficult situation. Being away from your baby for a short time now is, in some ways, fulfilling one of the main roles of being a parent. You are keeping your baby safe until you are together again.

Ways to keep and grow your bond to your baby during time apart

1. Ask the medical team to update you by phone or send you short film clips when they can, so you can see how your baby is and what they are doing. If you have any specific worries, for example, that they are unsettled or in pain, then you can ask to discuss them with the medical team. You can also ask for a video of your baby that helps address these specific concerns. You can sign up to the vCreate system to enable film clips or photos to be sent to you easily. Register at [w: www.vcreate.tv/unit/222](http://www.vcreate.tv/unit/222) or speak to a nurse for more information.
2. Sign up for Baby Diary, a free app that links to your baby's electronic notes so the staff can create a virtual diary for you. . You can get these updates straight to your phone and can chose the way you would like these messages written, for example from the nurse, or from your baby. You can ask a nurse to arrange this for you.
3. Write to your baby. Let them know that you are thinking about them, what you wish for them, what you have noticed about what kind of person they are growing up to be. You can read these letters to them when you see them again, or keep them in a special place for when they are older.
4. Set aside some time in your day to stop everything else and think about your baby. Some people like to light a candle or look at photos, or find another way that marks the time as special.
5. Use knitted bonding squares to keep the smell of your baby near you. If no one from your family can enter the hospital ask if they can be posted to you. See the Unicef website for information (details at the end of this leaflet).
6. Plan things to do with your baby when you see them again. For example, choose some songs to sing to them, or some stories you want to share.
7. If you have other children, involve them in making things and learning about the new baby. Can they make a picture that you can send in? Or can you make a story book with your children for the baby, about their home and the family they are part of?

Ways to maintain and grow your role as a parent

1. Stay as involved in your baby's care as you can. You can make a time to speak to the clinical team for updates and they will involve you in important decisions. Agree with your team when you would like to be contacted, for example, to know your baby has moved to a different room.
2. Read about the care they are receiving and familiarise yourself with the terms and equipment. You will find this information in your 'Welcome pack'. If you have not received this in person, please contact the unit. This will help you feel more confident and connected with what your baby is experiencing.
3. If you have had time to get to know your baby's likes and dislikes, ways of soothing them and preferences, consider making a list for the team looking after them to help them tailor their care.
4. Talk about your baby with friends and relatives and keep them as part of the family in all your interactions.
5. Remind yourself that while this absence feels long, it is very short in relation to your baby's lifetime. Your input and love as a parent and family will be with them throughout their lives.

Further support on the neonatal unit

If you would like more support with any of the issues discussed in this leaflet, or other psychological support, please let your nurse or doctor know. This unit has a range of family support options including an onsite neonatal psychology team who are here to support you throughout your baby's time on the unit.

Useful sources of information

Bliss is a charity that supports families with babies who are born prematurely or sick. They have a library of information about neonatal units, including regularly updated information about coronavirus. **w:** www.bliss.org.uk

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about separation from your baby on the Neonatal Unit please contact the neonatal team, **t:** 020 7188 4045.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Unicef, for more information about bonding squares,

w: www.unicef.org.uk/babyfriendly/baby-friendly-resources/relationship-building-resources/

Evelina London Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline. **t:** 020 7188 3003, Monday to Friday, 10am-5pm

e: letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** 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 get in touch. **t:** 020 7188 8815 **e:** languagesupport@gstt.nhs.uk

NHS 111

Offers medical help and advice from fully trained advisers supported by experienced nurses and paramedics. Available over the phone 24 hours a day. **t:** 111 **w:** 111.nhs.uk

NHS website

Online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you take control of your health and wellbeing. **w:** www.nhs.uk

Get involved and have your say: become a member of the Trust

Members of Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust contribute to the organisation on a voluntary basis. We count on them for feedback, local knowledge and support. Membership is free and it is up to you how much you get involved. To find out more, please get in touch.

t: 0800 731 0319 **e:** members@gstt.nhs.uk **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/membership

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