

# The Benefits of Baby Massage



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From the moment they arrive, little ones enjoy being held, cuddled and stroked. These warm, caring touches express love and caring—and, as medical research reveals, touch is also essential to a child's health and emotional development.

Along with gentle touches your child receives when you feed, diaper and rock them, you may want to add baby massage to your daily care routine. It's a simple and pleasurable way to make your infant feel safe, secure and cared for. (And it can be a lifesaver in calming a fussy baby!)

## The importance of touch in your child's life

Research shows that babies feel touch when they're still inside the womb. Right after delivery, birth teams encourage parents to hold infants close to their bare skin. This skin-to-skin care gives them immediate comfort and rich sensory input.

Newborns will often find their way to the breast of a nursing parent following sensory cues alone. But keep in mind that newborns welcome cuddles from all caring adults, so consider playing tag-team with your partner, spouse and others in holding and stroking your little one.

### Why is touch so essential for babies?

Touch sends wordless messages of sympathy and security that humans benefit from, no matter their age. Think of the hugs we exchange when we've been apart, or the way we pat a friend's back or give them a high-five when we congratulate them. We hold one another's hands for

support, offer back, shoulder or foot rubs to ease stress or stroke a loved one's hair when they are in distress.

This unspoken language of is especially eloquent in bonding with your baby. Touch is part of the circle of love that surrounds your child.

## **How infant massage benefits your baby**

In an infant's life, touch can mean holding, stroking, cuddling, patting, kissing, caressing, breastfeeding, skin-to-skin contact, and of course, baby massage.

Studies show that infant massage has a profoundly positive effect on your baby's physical health by helping them:

- Ease into healthy, restful sleep
- Feel calmer with lower levels of stress hormones
- Relax their muscles, encouraging flexibility in their arms and legs
- Breathe healthfully and gain good body awareness
- Digest food better and experience less constipation
- Benefit from healthier circulation and stronger immunity to disease
- Reach a higher stimulation threshold with less skin sensitivity
- Suffer fewer symptoms of colic, such as irritability and sleeplessness

## **The benefits of baby massage for parents**

Along with physical wellness, massage supports your infant's emotional and psychological development. Regular baby massage will help you:

- Feel even more confidence in your daily care routine
- Learn to read your baby's cues, discovering what they like and don't like
- Bond with your child, achieving the healthy attachment that supports long-term health
- Feel calm and relaxed together, easing away everyday stress
- Build trust and security that supports healthy development

## **Deep-touch pressure and its effects on your baby**

The benefits of massage come from what many occupational therapists call deep-touch pressure, which has been shown to have a calming, organizing effect on the nervous system.

## **What is deep-touch pressure?**

Deep-touch pressure happens when you apply firm, yet gentle and consistent pressure on your baby's body. Within moments, your baby's breathing and heart rate will respond to your touch as their autonomic nervous system—which governs breathing, heartbeat and more—is soothed.

## **Follow your baby's cues**

Babies respond differently to deep-touch pressure. Always watch for signals that your child enjoys what you're doing, and stop the massage if they seem to have any discomfort.

If you're not sure your baby likes a sensation, you can hold or press down on the part of the body you are focusing on, but without moving your hands. When you see that this form of touch is pleasing to your baby, you can try moving your hands while maintaining firm pressure.

If your little one shows signs that they'd rather not be touched in a given way in a particular moment, don't take it personally. Just like adults, babies sometimes aren't in the mood for certain kinds of sensory stimulation. Over time, you will learn which touches are most effective in soothing and pleasing your baby.

## **6 massage techniques to try with your infant**

Here are some massage strokes that are part of the CALM touch strategy, a proven way of soothing and relaxing your infant. As you explore them, keep in mind that you don't have to use all the techniques, or even apply them in a certain order. Just try them out during the day, noticing what your baby likes best.

- **Back**

Use deep-touch pressure down your infant's back. Move your touch from their shoulders down to their lower back, or place your hand firmly on your baby's bottom. This technique can increase your child's comfort and pleasure during tummy time. You can also massage your infant's back when they are sitting up on their own, in your lap or cradled in your arms.

- **Hands**

Firmly hold your baby's hands. Put your thumb in their palm and hold your fingers down on the top of the hand. You can bring both hands together or massage one at a time. Alternatively, you can massage the palm of your baby's hand using a circular motion. This can be especially helpful if your infant tends to keep their hands in a tight fist.

- **Feet**

Touch and firmly hold your baby's feet, one in each hand. Gently clap their feet together to add more sensory stimulation. For a foot massage, hold your baby's ankle in one hand and use your free hand to hold their foot with your fingers on top and your thumb underneath. Stroke firmly along the foot and gently tug the toes. (Be sure to use deep-touch pressure; if you stroke too lightly, it will tickle!)

- **Shoulders**

Rub your baby's shoulders while they sit supported on your lap. Move your hands firmly down their arms. Who doesn't love a little shoulder rub?

- **Full body**

With your baby on their back, use firm pressure to move down their body. Begin at the head and move along the outside of the body all the way to your child's feet. You can also move your hands down the center of your baby's body; start at the chest and move toward the belly, then down the front of the legs.

- **Head**

Some babies love having their head stroked and some don't, so watch for your baby's reaction! Cup your hands around their head and stroke backwards with both hands over the crown of the head. Then move along the jawline and bring your hands toward the chin. Stroke across the forehead and across the eyebrows. You can also trace small circles on your baby's cheeks and squeeze their chin. Follow your child's lead—they will show you what they enjoy most.

## **Tips for incorporating massage into bath time, changing & more**

Practicing infant massage doesn't have to happen only during a dedicated session. You can work loving touches into other parts of your daily care routine, too.

- After a bath, wrap your baby in a towel and run some long, firm strokes down their arms, legs and back.
- During diaper changes, provide a little tummy massage.
- Touch and hold your baby's foot while you feed them, or when they're feeling especially fussy.

## **High-touch parenting to balance "container time"**

Deep-touch pressure is more important than ever in a time when parents and caregivers tend to move little ones from container to container throughout the day.

Many believe that keeping babies in portable carriers, bassinets, cribs, strollers and playpens is safest. They may assume active time is best spent in bouncy seats, swings and other play devices. But occupational and physical therapists who work with children say that these holding devices—no matter how innovative and comfortable they may seem—are not ideal. In fact, they can actually deprive children of the touch and movement experiences they need to grow and develop.

The benefits of holding, carrying, wearing and handling your baby far outweigh the convenience of these baby devices. Naturally, you'll need a safety-rated car seat and other equipment,

especially when you're on the go. But your child will benefit from a high-touch approach that balances "container time" with long, relaxing moments spent close to you.

## **How touch and massage can soothe a fussy baby**

While scientists are still exploring the root causes of infant colic, most parents are familiar with the crying, fussiness and physical discomfort it triggers in infants. Using massage to soothe a baby with colic—or teething discomfort, growing pains and more—can bring comfort to the whole family.

We recommend the Colic Relief Routine developed by Vimala McClure, author and founder of the International Association of Infant Massage. With this method, you can massage your child at least 30 minutes after they eat, but only if they are quiet and alert. If your child gets fussier, stop—you can always try again later.

### **Is massage oil safe for babies?**

Using oil helps your hands move smoothly over your baby's tummy. Try a natural oil like coconut. You can also use non-medicated baby rubs for babies age 3 months and older. Don't use adult massage oils, hand lotion or nut-based oils (this last option might cause an allergic reaction).

Offer your baby a calming massage daily to help them feel more comfortable and relaxed (and work wonders in soothing your nerves, too).

You can learn baby massage from a certified educator of infant massage (CEIM). There are classes that offered throughout the United States. Check International Association of Infant Massage website for locations near you.

## **About the authors**



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## About Dr. Fishbein



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