

DEVELOPMENTAL CARE IN THE LATE PRETERM INFANT

Late preterm babies have a wide range of behaviors. Some babies behave maturely as soon as they are born, while others require additional support from their parents and hospital care providers. Providers need to recognize the specific signs of immature behavior and respond appropriately. As late preterm infants develop and approach term gestational age, they will display more mature behaviors.

Signs of Immature Behavior

Late preterm infants will sometimes show immature behaviors after they are born. Some specific signs that parents may observe are:

- Sleepiness – Babies may be unable to sustain their attention during a feeding or while being held.
- Finger splaying – Babies may open their hands widely and spread their fingers apart:



- Fisting – Babies may tighten their hands into a fist:



- Gaze aversion – Babies may look away when someone is looking at them or talking to them directly.
- Mottling – Babies may have a red and white marble appearance of their skin.
- Easily stimulated – Babies may move quickly from being content to frantic when the environment is noisy or overstimulating.
- Tremors – Some babies may have rhythmic shaking movements of their arms and legs. This shaking is easily stopped by holding the infant's arm or leg.

Sometimes these signs occur for no identifiable reason. Other times, a baby may be reacting to something specific. For example, a late preterm infant may show one of these behaviors in the following situations:

- A noisy environment, such as people talking loudly or high volume from a television set,
- Bright lighting,
- While being touched in a light, delicate manner, or
- With increased movements, such as vigorous rocking,

Parents can learn to recognize their infant's signs of stress and use strategies to help support their infant until he/she shows mature behaviors.

Supporting the Late Preterm Infant

When a late preterm infant shows signs of stress, there are many strategies that parents can use to help their infant. Infants often respond well to environmental changes, such as decreasing the noise level and reducing the lighting in the room. When an infant is upset, parents can help to calm their baby by swaddling and using firm touching when the baby is unswaddled. Holding the baby skin-to-skin may also help keep both parents and babies relaxed. Parents of late preterm infants may find that their babies do not tolerate long periods of activity or overstimulation, such as a large number of visitors. Even feedings may need to take place in a quiet environment because late preterm infants can be easily distracted.

Conclusion

Some late preterm infants may show their immaturity by reacting to their environment with signs of stress. Families can learn to recognize these signs and help their baby adjust to their surroundings. Families should feel reassured that any signs of immaturity will disappear over time. This usually happens around term gestational age but for some, this may take a few weeks longer.