

“Mouth Care” with Mother’s Milk for Your NICU Baby

When full-term babies feed at the breast, milk coats or *paints* the inside of the baby’s mouth and throat with protective substances that help lower the chances of infections, especially in the ears, throat and lungs.

In the NICU, babies are often too small or sick to feed at breast or receive their mother’s milk in a bottle. We do the next best thing: *paint* the inside of your baby’s mouth several times each day with drops of your milk, a NICU procedure called **mouth care** (also called oropharyngeal care).

Does mouth care with my milk help lower the chances of infection in my NICU baby?

Mouth care with your milk is one part of many NICU practices in lowering the chances of infection in your baby. Mouth care may be especially important in lowering the chances of lung infections in premature babies who need CPAP or a ventilator to help their breathing.

How do the protective substances in my milk work in my baby’s mouth and throat?

Researchers think there are three ways that mouth care may help lower the chance of infections.

1. Protective parts of the milk pass into your baby’s blood stream. Tonsils and adenoids are part of the body’s overall infection-fighting system, and are referred to as **oropharyngeal lymphoid tissues (OFALT)**. Protective substances in your milk are pulled inside these OFALT tissues, which pass them into your baby’s blood stream, lowering the chances of many kinds of infections.

2. Your milk keeps harmful germs from sticking to your baby’s mouth and throat. Some parts of your milk, called **natural killer cells**, look for and directly kill harmful bacteria in your baby’s mouth and throat. Other parts, called **oligosaccharides**, work like magnets, searching for harmful germs. They stick to the parts of the germs that want to reach your baby’s tissues, making them harmless. An entire army of **good bacteria** in your milk forms a protective shield that keeps harmful germs from getting to your baby’s mouth and throat.

3. Your milk works together with your baby’s saliva to kill harmful germs. Special substances in your milk stimulate naturally-occurring protection in your baby’s saliva to become active and powerful. This milk-saliva partnership makes it hard for harmful germs to live and grow in your baby’s mouth and throat.

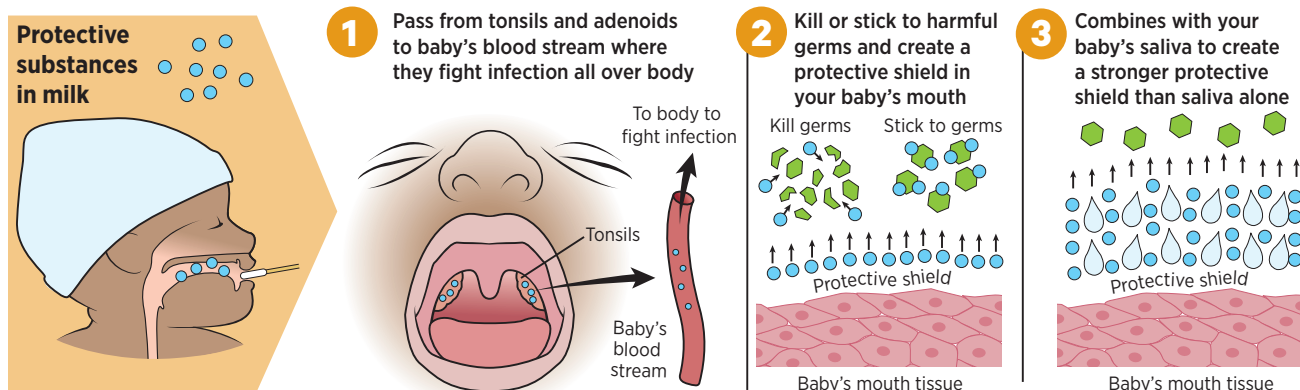
Is mouth care with my milk safe for my baby?

I was told he is too little (or sick) for feedings by mouth? Many researchers have shown that mouth care with mothers’ milk is safe. Also, babies enjoy the taste and smell of their mother’s milk and start sucking and making smacking sounds. We will show you and your baby’s father how to do mouth care so it can be your job when you are in the NICU.

How often and how long should my baby receive mouth care with my milk?

We will start mouth care as soon after birth as you are able to make a few drops of milk. Although each NICU baby is different, mouth care is given every 3-4 hours from birth until your baby is able to receive your milk several times each day by breast or bottle.

Protective Substances in Your Milk Work in Your Baby’s Mouth



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Rodriguez et al., *J Perinatol* 29 (2009): 1-7.

Sohn et al., *J Perinatol* 36 (2016): 106-111.

Sweeney et al., *Nature* 8 (2018): 15112.



Disclaimer

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We look forward to your inquiry at: contact@lactahub.org