Helping Premature Babies to Breathe

Linkworker info

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Tel: 0161 276 6206 / 6342

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Introduction

Babies who are born early often need help with their breathing.

This leaflet tells you how we help babies with their breathing.

We hope this leaflet answers some of your questions, however, if you are not sure about anything please speak to the nurses and doctors on the unit.

What help can you provide to assist my baby’s breathing?

We can help babies breathe by giving them extra air flow ("CPAP" – see below) or by using a ventilator (breathing machine).

A few babies need other sorts of help including high frequency ventilation.

What is “CPAP”? 

CPAP stands for “Continuous Positive Airway Pressure”. When a baby has CPAP, small tubes in the nostrils give a continuous flow of air or oxygen while the baby breathes. Sometimes a small mask is used instead of the tubes. The extra air through the nose makes it easier for your baby to breathe.

My baby needs to be ventilated – what does this mean?

If a baby needs to be ventilated this means that they are not able to breathe reliably for themselves. A tube is placed in the baby’s windpipe and connected a ventilator (also called a ‘breathing machine’ or ‘life-support machine’). The ventilator pushes air and oxygen into the lungs. We make sure that the right amount of air goes into the lungs at the right time.

Your baby may need to remain on the ventilator for days or weeks, depending on his/her condition.

We monitor your baby’s progress closely with regular blood tests.

Are there any problems or side effects with ventilation?

Problems are rare. A small number of babies on a ventilator (approximately 1 in 50) get a ‘pneumothorax’. This is when a lung collapses because of a leak of air between the lung and the chest wall. If a baby has a large pneumothorax a tube - called a chest drain - is inserted into the chest, to remove the extra air.

Will my baby have breathing problems in the future?

Most babies who have needed breathing support do not have problems in the future.

However, a few babies may need oxygen for weeks or months after they come off a ventilator.

If a child has severe lung problems after birth they may have a higher risk of asthma as they grow up.

What is “High Frequency” Ventilation?

A high frequency ventilator works 10 times a second, while normal ventilators usually work up to once a second. The higher speed of this type of ventilator helps the air and oxygen move around the lungs better. We find that this works better than normal ventilation for some babies. There is much more movement of the chest wall when using high frequency but, babies are not distressed by this.

Who do I ask for more information?

Please ask to speak to one of the nurses or doctors if you have any further questions.