



# The Power of Skin to Skin Contact



Hamilton  
Public Health Services

“Skin-to-skin” means no blankets or clothing between mother and baby. It means cuddling, soothing, calming and “wearing” your baby as much as possible. It may seem strange that such a simple, natural and pleasant thing to do has so many physical benefits. Mother’s body is a baby’s habitat. It is the most familiar, calming and healthy place for baby to grow and thrive. A medical doctor and researcher in Africa discovered that premature babies who were cared for 24 hours a day on the mother’s body improved their chance of survival from 10 to 50 percent! Human babies are “programmed” to respond to their mother’s smell, voice and feel of her skin. Skin-to-skin is not just a “nice” thing to do ... it is critical for your baby’s healthy growth and development. This same researcher, Dr. Nils Bergman, also found that babies who are separated from their mothers become distressed more easily and will cry more and not feed or digest their food as well. Many parents have believed that holding the baby too much will “spoil” her. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

A baby's sense of smell is much stronger than that of adults. It is their sense of smell that guides

them to latch by themselves if left undisturbed skin to skin. Mom should avoid the use of perfumes/ scented lotions, or nipple cleansing especially in the immediate post birth moments.

Research shows that babies who are kept skin-to-skin with their mothers are more likely to

- latch on more easily and breastfeed well
- have better digestion
- cry up to 10 times less (less stress for baby and parents!)
- stay warmer than if wrapped in blankets
- have higher blood sugar
- have relief from pain when painful procedures are done

These benefits are even more important for premature babies who were not ready to be separated from the womb. Premature babies who have lots of skin-to-skin contact with their mothers tend to

- be discharged from hospital sooner,
- have fewer blood pressure, heart rate and breathing difficulties
- keep better oxygen levels
- breastfeed better at discharge
- have lower levels of stress hormones
- have a better parent-child relationship

Even if a baby has an IV and is on oxygen and is being fed by a tube, he can still spend his time at mother's breast, skin-to-skin. Talk to your doctor or nurse about providing this for your baby.

The hormone oxytocin is released during skin-to-skin contact. It is also released during orgasm, massage, touch, stroking and acupuncture. For both men and women, it is the hormone of well-being and is called "the hormone of love."



Skin-to-skin is not just for babies. When mothers are together with their babies it

- brings greater blood flow to her breasts
- helps her to digest food more fully, helping her to make milk and maintain energy
- decreases stress hormones and makes her more calm

- increases her pain threshold and improves healing
- may decrease chance or severity of post partum depression as oxytocin has been found to have antidepressant qualities.

It is so important to spend as much time skin-to-skin with your baby as possible, right after birth and beyond. You and baby have just been through the stress and work of birth. A little calming oxytocin is welcome! It also starts baby off on the right track in adjusting to life, recognizing his mother and starting the independent growth process. It might prevent interventions such as IV's and supplementation if your baby's blood sugar, temperature and other functions are stable. It might also make a big difference in how mother and baby adjust to life after birth. It is also a great way to parent your child and provide him with the resources he needs to be content and healthy. Even though the physical effects are not the same, it is also helpful for dads to cuddle their babies skin to skin. Your baby will appreciate it.

Skin-to-skin ... proof that our maternal instinct is pretty smart after all.

Other reading:

[www.kangaroomothercare.com/whatis03.htm](http://www.kangaroomothercare.com/whatis03.htm)

[www.BreastfeedingMadeSimple.com](http://www.BreastfeedingMadeSimple.com)