

[IMAGE]

## **The Power of Touch**

### **Ask Your Doctor About the Health Benefits of Infant Massage**

By Christie Bondurant

For centuries, massage has been used to promote wellness by increasing circulation, improving immune function and releasing emotional stress. More and more studies are showing that infants may enjoy these same healthful benefits.

Infant massage is an age-old parenting practice used in many cultures including Asia, Eastern Europe, Africa and Latin America. As a daily routine, mothers in India have been massaging their newborns since 3000 B.C., much longer than their Western counterparts. It's only in the past 30 years that infant massage has taken hold in the West. For parents who practice infant massage, calming a baby has never been so easy.

There are many reasons for infant massage therapy, from serious problems preterm infants face to common discomforts healthy full-term infants endure. Preterm infants, along with their parents, face some hard realities. Massage can help soothe the daily discomforts of these tiny frames, and in some cases promote a faster recovery.

In a recent study published in *Infant Behavior and Development*, preterm infants exposed to daily stressors in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) showed reduced stress behaviors after massage therapy. "Infants received three 15-min. massages administered at 9 a.m., 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. each day for five consecutive days. The massages were started on a Monday and ended on Friday of the same week, for a total of 15 massages. The preterm infants received their massages from licensed massage therapists who were trained on a structured protocol." The study concluded that even after such limited exposure of only five days, preterm infants "showed fewer stress behaviors from the first to the last day," suggesting the therapy "desensitizes the preterm infant to the stressful environment of the NICU, perhaps by enhancing longer periods of parasympathetic activity." The study also suggests that over time, massage therapy has a stress-reducing or "pacifying effect" to infants.

Infant enjoying a massage. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark For those familiar with infant massage, you are more than likely aware of the studies showing improvements in weight gain in preterm infants who receive infant massage; however, other benefits may surround the much-needed weight gain. The *Journal of Pediatrics* (July 2005) reported, "The weight gain experienced by preterm neonates receiving moderate-pressure massage therapy may be mediated by increased vagal activity and gastric motility." The study concluded that the weight gain in preterm infants might be directly related to "massage-induced increases in vagal activity, which in turn may lead to increased gastric motility and thereby weight gain."

In healthy, full-term infants, massage therapy can relieve common discomforts such as colic, gas and constipation. It also has been shown to improve sleep, reduce stress behaviors, and regulate and strengthen the baby's digestive and respiratory systems, as well as stimulate circulatory and nervous systems.

Vimala McClure, founder of the International Association of Infant Massage, is known as one of the pioneers who brought infant massage to the West. She has written books on the subject and developed techniques for teachers and parents all over the world. In her book *Infant Massage: A Handbook for Loving Parents*, McClure expresses the need for newborns to experience massage. "For an infant, massage is much more than a luxurious, sensual experience or a type of physical therapy. It's a tool for maintaining a child's health and well-being on many levels."

An infant's feet being massaged. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark If you're an expectant or new parent and are interested in infant massage, your doctor can provide you with more information. You also can visit the following Web sites: Touch Research Institute ([www.miami.edu/touch-research](http://www.miami.edu/touch-research)), International Association of Infant Massage ([www.iaim-us.com](http://www.iaim-us.com)), American Massage Therapy Association ([www.amtamassage.org](http://www.amtamassage.org)) and the International Loving Touch Foundation ([www.lovingtouch.com](http://www.lovingtouch.com)).

### **Bond With Your Baby and Improve Their Health**

For new parents interested in infant massage, consider trying the following techniques after checking with your doctor and/or taking infant massage classes: Infant having his face massaged. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark

**Face** - With your thumbs, stroke across the upper lip and then across the lower lip and into the cheek as if drawing a smile. This helps soothe the muscles used for sucking.

Infant enjoying a massage. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Tummy** - With both hands together at the center of the baby's chest, push out to the sides, following the rib cage as if smoothing out the pages of a book. Without lifting your hands from the baby's body, bring them around in a heart-shaped motion to the center again.

infant's foot being massaged. - Copyright © Stock Photo / Register Mark **Legs** - Support the baby's foot with one hand and grasp the top of the thigh with your other hand. Stroke from heel to buttock, squeezing the leg in a "milking" motion.

\*Always take extra care when applying pressure to the infant, as too little pressure may tickle them or make them uncomfortable and too much pressure may be painful.

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