

Neonatal Physiotherapy Service

What is a Neonatal Therapist?



A Neonatal Physiotherapist aims to support the development of babies who may be at risk of having movement or developmental difficulties due to:

- Prematurity
- Low birth weight
- Problems before, during or after birth
- Problems or conditions affecting joints or muscles
- Other problems that may affect how they move

Most babies develop well in spite of being born early or being ill in their early life. We have a Physiotherapy Developmental Follow-up programme to monitor your baby's progress on the Neonatal Unit and after they go home, to reassure you when all is going well, to offer suggestions for appropriate developmental play activities and to make sure your baby gets the earliest possible help if they need it.

Who is referred to the Neonatal Service?

Premature babies born earlier than 30 weeks gestation or less than 1200g are routinely referred to the Physiotherapist for developmental monitoring and input as required. Other babies at risk of movement or developmental difficulties because they are small or sick, had a difficult start to life or have a known condition which may affect development are also referred by medical staff.

What does a Physiotherapy Assessment involve?

Developmental Assessment

The Physiotherapist may observe your baby to watch their active movements when they are awake. They may also place your baby in different positions (on their back, side and tummy), and move their arms and legs to assess their muscle tone (how stiff or floppy they are) and how well they respond to being handled.

The Physiotherapist may ask you if they can video your baby moving so they can look at their movements in more detail. This is called a **General Movements Assessment (GMA video)** and you will receive a leaflet and consent for to sign for the video to be taken. This assessment of a baby's spontaneous movements is repeated when

your baby is about 3 months old (corrected age if born prematurely) and gives a good insight into how your baby is doing developmentally.

Other Assessments

These may include looking more specifically at your baby's range of movement and muscle strength.

Physiotherapy on the Neonatal Unit

After an assessment the Physiotherapist will be able to advise you how your baby's movements and skills are developing. If your baby would benefit from support with their development the Physiotherapist will advise you and the nursing staff on ways you can support and encourage their movement and other skills. This may include ways to position, handle and carry your baby, developmental play ideas, and stretches. This advice is not usually a list of exercises, but ways to handle and position your baby through the day and night to help their development.

Developmental Care

In our Neonatal Unit we endeavour to practice family-centred developmental care for all babies. Developmental care encompasses a range of interventions that aim to reduce stress on babies, conserve their energy and promote growth, optimise and promote neurological development by mimicking the conditions of the womb as best as we are able to. These interventions include environmental adaptations such as dimming lights and reducing noise to protect your baby's developing eyes and ears, developmentally supportive positioning and positive touch practices (comfort holding/hand hugging, kangaroo cuddles/skin to skin etc).

Developmental Care also aims to encourage and support parents to allow them to play as full a role as possible in their baby's care. Your Physiotherapist will be happy to discuss aspects of developmental care with you.

Physiotherapy Follow-up after discharge home

Once discharged home babies born under 30 weeks gestation and other babies at risk of having movement or developmental difficulties will continue to be followed up by the Physiotherapist developmentally. This is usually to monitor their 'gross motor' movement development (such as learning to roll, sit, crawl, stand etc).

Frequency of appointments is dependent on each baby's needs, but appointments are usually at 3 to 6 month intervals until your baby is walking or until there are no further concerns surrounding their motor development.

Correcting for age

Motor development is measured from your baby's corrected age, that is from the date they were due, not from the day they were actually born. It is important to correct for your baby's prematurity to give an accurate assessment of their developmental abilities. When a baby is born early, their brain and the rest of their neurological system have not developed or matured to the same degree as a baby born at term. Even at term corrected age a baby born early moves in different ways to a term baby.

For example - If your baby was born at 28 weeks, their brain and the rest of their neurological system would need a full 12 weeks of growth before we would even expect them to function as a term newborn. Therefore, the developmental expectations of a premature baby are based on corrected age, rather than chronological (actual) age. We generally make this correction for age until children are 2 years corrected age.

Early Intervention Physiotherapy

Some babies may be identified as requiring more regular Physiotherapy input. This is because the evidence shows the first year of life is a 'critical period' for how your baby learns about their environment and how to move to explore it. Babies at risk of having difficulties with their motor skills or a delay in their development benefit from early focused play activities to help them learn to move. This is called Early Intervention Therapy.

The Neonatal Physiotherapist will discuss with you if your baby is identified as likely to benefit from more frequent, longer-term input from the Physiotherapy team, and will then transfer your care to a Paediatric Physiotherapist who will be able to provide therapy input and ongoing monitoring. This Physiotherapist will be based at your local Children's Centre -

Serennu Children's Centre – Newport

Caerphilly Children's Centre – Caerphilly

Nevill Hall Children's Centre - Abergavenny

If you have any questions or worries about your baby's movements or development, please talk to the Neonatal Physiotherapist on the Unit or leave a message at Serennu Children's Centre (01633) 748064