Massage Reduces Hospital Stay for Preterm Infants

Maternal massage therapy reduced the number of days in the hospital, as well as the occurrence of late-onset sepsis, in infants with very low birth weight, according to recent research.

The study, “Massage therapy reduces hospital stay and occurrence of sepsis in very preterm neonates,” involved a total of 104 newborns with a gestational age of 32 weeks or less and a birth weight between 750 and 1,500 grams. The mothers of each infant also participated in the massage intervention.

Infants in the study were randomly selected for either the massage group or the control group, with 52 babies in each group. All preterm neonates in both groups already were receiving deliberate skin-to-skin contact, or “kangaroo care,” as standard care.

Mothers of babies in the massage group were instructed to provide their infants with a 15-minute massage four times a day, during a six-hour time period each day. These mothers were taught an infant-massage sequence that involved maternal massage to the face and limbs, as well as passive exercises of the baby’s upper and lower limbs.

Aside from the massage, newborns in both groups received the same care, which consisted of skin-to-skin contact from their mothers. This occurred throughout each baby’s stay in the hospital, as did massage for those preterm neonates assigned to the intervention group.

The primary outcome measure in the study was length of stay at the hospital. The criteria for discharge from the hospital included an infant’s ability to maintain body temperature while dressed and accept oral feeding without suction difficulties.

Secondary outcomes included the infant’s growth, feeding behavior and the occurrence of late-onset sepsis (occurring at least 72 hours after birth). Sepsis is the presence of harmful bacteria and toxins in tissue.

Results of the research revealed that infants with very low birth weight who received maternal massage in addition to “kangaroo care” left the hospital seven days sooner than similar newborns who did not receive massage.

The research also showed that the occurrence of late-onset sepsis was significantly higher among infants in the control group, as compared to those who received massage.

“This study suggests that the mother’s participation through massage therapy is a significant predictor of hospital discharge in [very low birth weight] neonates, even those cared for in skin-to-skin contact,” said the study’s authors, “increasing their probability of hospital discharge 1.85 times.”


For more info or to schedule infant massage lessons, call Certified Somatic Therapist Karen Axelrod at 310-376-0113.