

SWADDLE BATHING – STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE
SIMPSONS and ST JOHNS NEONATAL UNITS
AND
ROYAL HOSPITAL FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE
NHS Lothian Children and Young People's Occupational Therapy

1. PURPOSE

This standard operating procedure (SOP) will outline the rationale, method and safety considerations for swaddle bathing on Simpson's and St John's neonatal units and the Royal Hospital for Children and Young People. This will comply with NHS Lothian guidelines for Safer Bathing, Showering and Surface Temperature Procedure (Health & Safety) and Developmental Care guidelines. The purpose of this SOP is to guide Occupational Therapy staff in the rationale and method of swaddle bathing. This can be used or adapted by other health care professionals with the clinical competencies/training to carry out a swaddle bath at their discretion and following approval within their own professional management structure.

2. INTRODUCTION

Bathing an infant is an important and common practice for newborn babies and their caregivers. Despite the many advantages of bathing, it can be a time of increased stress for both the infant and their caregiver. For preterm babies in particular, this increased stress can have a significant impact on an already immature central nervous system, which may have a detrimental effect on their developmental outcomes. Routine immersion baths can also have more immediate adverse physiological and behavioural responses such as an increased heart rate and oxygen requirement, as well as challenging the preterm infant's complex thermoregulatory system.

Swaddle bathing is a developmentally supportive practice that can help to lessen some of the negative effects of bathing a preterm or newborn infant. By wrapping the infant in a muslin cloth while in the bath, the infant is provided with gentle containment, keeping them in a flexed, midline position. The wet muslin provides proprioceptive and vestibular input that is equal around the body and will help the infant to understand where their body is in space and to give them a sense of orientation to their environment. Keeping the limbs flexed and hands in midline supports the infant with self-regulation and can provide them with the opportunity to self-soothe by bringing their hands to mouth. The muslin also acts as a warm layer to help maintain the infant's temperature while in the bath water.

Parenting is an important occupational role, and one that can be challenged when an infant is cared for in the hospital setting. Bathing the infant is an important first experience for parents, and supporting this in a way that reduces parental stress is important. Research suggests that swaddle bathing shows a reduction in parental stress.

3. SCOPE

This SOP is to be used as a guide for any staff member with the clinical competencies/training to carrying out a swaddle bath with infants, following discussion with the family, nursing and medical care team and by meeting the following criteria:

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- Any baby that is deemed clinically stable enough to have a bath
- Ability to regulate body temperature i.e. not reliant on an incubator or heated mattress
- No surgical lines in situ
- High flow oxygen support or less, unless considered on an individual basis
- Stable monitoring in the last 24 hours
- Parents/caregivers are deemed to have capacity to participate in bathing their infant in a safe and supportive manner
- Consideration to seizure patterns, skin integrity and infection control should be considered on an individual basis in conjunction with the medical and nursing team

All parties could be exposed to risk of scald if water temperature is too high. Patients are at risk of ingesting water if not correctly supervised and supported during bathing. There is also a risk to staff and parents of spilling water during filling and emptying of baths or from water on the floor and therefore a risk of slipping. Please see Lothian guidelines for Safer Bathing, Showering and Surface Temperature Procedure (Health & Safety) for further information.

Due to the structure and composition of newborn skin, using cleansers or products in an infant's bath is not recommended until 4 weeks of life. This allows time for an infant's skin to balance in pH as it develops the protective acid mantle, which acts as a natural bacterial protective barrier.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES

An infant's first bath should always be done in partnership with a parent or caregiver, unless otherwise agreed. When an infant is suitable for their first bath, the parent information leaflet (appendix A) should be provided with time for parents to read and process the information within. Discussion should be had about the first bath being a graded exposure to a new experience and will be stopped at any time the infant is finding it challenging. Discussion about manual handling and parental restrictions in movement or handling should be considered before deciding on roles and responsibilities.

Roles should be decided before the bath and should encourage as much parental involvement as possible, where appropriate. This includes:

- Preparation of the infant for the bath – undressing and swaddling in muslin cloth
- Preparation of bath and gathering of all materials required
- Person lifting and holding the infant while in the bath
- Person washing the infant
- Person drying and redressing the infant following bath

5. SPECIFIC PROCEDURE

- Carefully consider the timing of the infant's bath. Ideally the bathing process will be carried out around an hour before the infant is due to be fed.
- Provide swaddle bathing leaflet to parents to read before the bath starts. This outlines the rationale and methodology of swaddle bathing.

- Gather resources required – a muslin cloth, cotton wool balls, small cardboard bowl, orange waste bag, 2x clean dry towels, clean nappy and clothes for redressing, clean and dry blankets and hat for warmth after bath.
- Sterile water may be required to wash eyes of more vulnerable babies. *Clinical reasoning and discretion to be used as to whether this is a required step, including reason for bath e.g. initial bathing experience or preparation for discharge.*
- Once materials have been gathered at cot side, clean and rinse baby bath using detergent wash and wipe clean to ensure no remaining detergent is left in the bath.
- Using the appropriate sink, run the bath to roughly half full with warm water.
- Check the temperature of the water using a bath thermometer (found in unit or ward), the bath should be between 37 and 38 degrees Celsius.
- Undress the baby, leaving their nappy on. Loosely swaddle them in a muslin cloth while still in cot (see appendix B for swaddling instructions)
- Using a small bowl, scoop some clean water out of the bath and set it to one side
- Using the water in the small bowl and cotton wool, gently wash the infant's face
- Use a different cotton wool ball to wash each eye, to avoid any transference of infection. This can be carried out with sterile water if clinically indicated.
- Once the face is washed, remove the baby's nappy and dispose in the orange waste bag.
- Before placing baby in the bath, recheck water temperature and adjust if necessary. Water temperature should be verified by a parent/caregiver and documented in Badger notes by the clinician leading the bath.
- Keeping the baby loosely swaddled, slowly place baby feet first into the bath. Brace their feet against the end of the bath and place their bottom on the bottom of the bath to support stability.
- Scoop the bath water up and over the muslin to ensure that the whole cloth is wet.
- Allow the infant time to adjust to being in the bath. Provide gentle and supportive holding at their front or allow them to suck a dummy if extra support with regulation is required.
- Starting with the arms, gently remove one limb at a time to wash it and rewrap in the swaddle, making sure that the infant's armpits and hands are washed with water.
- Once all four limbs are washed, unwrap the swaddle to allow water to reach the nappy area. Encourage parents to wipe the nappy area with cotton wool for hygiene.
- If the infant remains regulated, hold them in supported sitting or supported side lying to wash their back.
- If the infant is still well regulated, use the clean water that was set aside at the beginning to wash the infant's hair by running a steady stream of water over the crown of their head, avoiding the face.
- Throughout the bath, ensure that the infant's neurobehavioural cues are being read and listened to. The bath can be discontinued at any time, if the infant is finding the process challenging and/or displaying any signs of dysregulation (extension of limbs, finger splaying, blanching across bridge of nose or around lips, raised eyebrows, yawning, sneezing, gagging, possetting).
- When the infant is ready to finish the bath, the person holding them should lift them out of the water still wrapped in the muslin cloth.
- Lift to second person's arms, ready and waiting to wrap them in a towel.

- Line cot with second towel. Once regulated, place infant in cot and remove wrapped towel and muslin.
- Dry infant quickly using towel lining cot.
- Dry head and don hat, redress and add blankets for warmth.
- Provide comfort and regulatory strategies to infant if required:
 - Pause process to allow infant time to regulate
 - Proprioceptive and tactile support – provide gentle supportive holding encouraging infant's hands to midline/mouth. Ensure baby is flexed and in midline alignment
 - Reduce noise and light levels if possible
 - Encourage parents to speak gently and calmly to soothe baby
 - Provide non-nutritive sucking – dummy or finger
- Dispose of bath water in correct sink. Place used towels in correct laundry bin and dispose of orange waste bag in clinical waste.
- Check infant's temperature after 15 minutes. If within normal limits, remove hat and any extra blankets that have been applied.

6. APPENDIX

- A. Swaddle bathing leaflet can be found in store cupboard drawer alongside the muslins, or attached to the end of this guideline.

CHANGE HISTORY

Revision	Date	Changes	Edited By
New SOP	March 2025		Alison Johnson OT Claire Adamson, Clinical nurse manager

7. REFERENCES

Brazleton neurobehavioural cues information: <https://www.brazleton.co.uk/resources>

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Swaddling a baby: <https://www.pampers.ca/en-ca/newborn-baby/sleep/article/how-to-swaddle-a-baby>

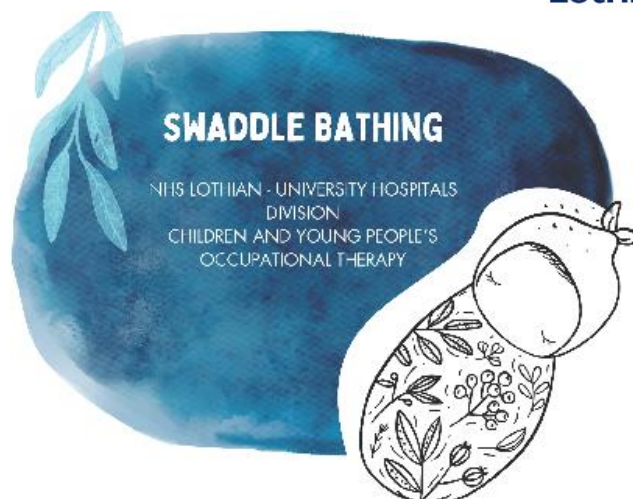
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Bathing your baby can be a joyful parenting experience. Swaddle bathing is a gentle, supportive way to bath your baby in the NICU and at home. Swaddle bathing can help your baby to enjoy bath time by reducing stress, maintaining their temperature and helping them to feel safe in the water.

Speak to your occupational therapist for any advice and to learn how to safely swaddle your baby for the bath.



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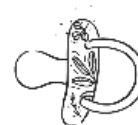
HOW TO SWADDLE BATHE YOUR BABY

- Undress your baby, leaving their nappy on. Loosely swaddle them in a muslin cloth
- Using a little bowl, scoop some water out of the bath and set it to one side
- Wash their face gently with cotton wool and warm water
- Once you have washed their face, remove your baby's nappy
- Keeping your baby loosely swaddled, slowly place baby feet first into a warm bath
- Gently remove one arm at a time to wash it and rewrap in the swaddle
- Once you have washed baby's arms, repeat with their legs
- Use the clean water you set aside at the start to gently wash baby's hair
- Make sure you have a warm towel ready to wrap baby in at the end of the bath



KEY POINTS

- Always check the temperature of the bath using a bath thermometer (you can get this in your baby box). The water should be between 37 - 38 degrees Celsius.
- Be prepared, have everything you need to hand before you start bathing your baby
- Avoid using any bathing products in the first 4 weeks of life. Following this, try to use gentle, unscented products.
- Your baby won't need a bath every day but remember to wash their hands and face each day
- Your baby might find it difficult to come out of the water after a bath. Wrap them in their towel to keep them warm and dry straight away - this also helps them to feel safe and secure
- Offering your baby a feed, or non-nutritive sucking (e.g. their dummy) can also help them to feel calm after having a bath



USEFUL VIDEOS

You can find a helpful guide on swaddle bathing here:

