A Mother's Touch May Boost Babies' Physical and Mental Health

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We all know that a baby needs its mother's loving touch to develop into a happy, healthy child. But new findings on premature infants (a.k.a. preemies) published in the journal Biological Psychiatry suggests that the general health effects of skin-to-skin contact early in life may last longer than previously thought, Live Science reports.

For the study, researchers asked 73 mothers to give their babies skin-to-skin contact for one hour each day during the first two weeks of life. Scientists also looked at 73 premature infants who spent this period of time in an incubator, without human contact. (This is the typical standard of care for babies born early.)

Researchers found that at age 10 the children who received skin-to-skin contact with their moms (a.k.a. "kangaroo care") slept better and developed an improved mature nervous system function as infants. What's more, these kids also showed better hormonal responses to stress, as well as superior thinking skills later on in life.

"Maternal-infant contact in the neonatal period has a favorable impact on stress physiology and behavioral control across long developmental epochs in humans," said Ruth Feldman, PhD, a professor of psychology at Israel's Bar-Ilan University, and co-author of the study.

Researchers suggest that when parents hold preemies in their arms, it may re-create the closed, caring environment infants would have had if they weren't born early. In addition, these touching episodes may help a baby learn to regulate physical and mental conditions outside the womb.

Findings also showed that the benefits of human contact go both ways. Mothers in the study who maintained physical contact with their babies also reported having a deeper, more caring relationship with their kids than mothers who did not.

Studies also show that preemies may be more likely to develop adult diabetes. Click here for more information.

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