

Lullabies soothe preemies, parents alike

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Study looked at music therapy combining songs and special womb-like sounds.

(HealthDay)—Lullabies have been used to soothe babies since time immemorial. Now, scientists say that premature infants in particular can benefit from combining this tactic with other forms of music therapy, such as simulated womb sounds synchronized to preemies' vital signs.

Studying 272 infants in 11 hospital [neonatal intensive care](#) units (NICUs), researchers from Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City found that live music matched to [babies'](#) breathing and [heart rates](#) enhanced feeding and sleeping patterns. Parent-selected lullabies also seemed to promote bonding between parents and babies, easing the stress of the chaotic NICU environment.

"Historically, [premature infants](#) were thought to be best off left alone in a quiet, closed [incubator](#) with no stimulation," said study author Joanne Loewy, director of Beth Israel's Louis Armstrong Center for Music & Medicine.

However, she added, "In more recent times, we're seeing that the right kind of stimulation—particularly live, interactive music—can enhance babies' neurological function and increase their quiet-alert state. It helps them through those tough moments . . . the more we can regulate the sound environment, the better they're going to fare."

The study was released online April 15 in advance of publication in the May print issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

Loewy and her colleagues examined the effects of three different types of [music therapy](#) interventions on premature babies. The infants were born at least 32 weeks into gestation and were small for their gestational age or suffered from conditions including respiratory distress and sepsis.

Three times each week for two weeks, certified music therapists used devices called Remo ocean discs and gato boxes, which replicated "whoosh" and heartbeat [womb](#) sounds while synchronized with infants' breath and heart patterns. Parents or therapists also sung the lullabies preferred by the babies' parents (called "songs of kin"), or "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" when parents had no preference.

Compared to babies not receiving any music therapies, babies who did showed more positive health effects such as better sleeping and feeding patterns. Those exposed to the ocean disc sounds experienced improved blood-oxygen levels and quiet-alert states. Additionally, parents' perception of stress in the NICU environment significantly decreased with the interventions, the study said.

"Many NICUs are noisy, or people put on random lullabies that are recorded," Loewy said. "What we're saying is, it's not just any old lullaby that's recorded, it's the power of the parent's voice synchronized therapeutically . . . and the other two sounds that can have a therapeutic benefit."

Dr. Joseph Awadalla, a neonatologist at Redlands Community Hospital, in California, agreed that such therapy helps premature infants thrive. He noted that womb-like sounds have been used in some hospitals for at least the last 20 years to soothe and relax babies.

"I'm aware that not all the [NICUs] do this kind of therapy," Awadalla said. "There should be no obstacle to using it—there just needs to be an understanding from the staff that choosing it will help."

The cost of such therapy is minimal, study author Loewy said, and depends on the region of the United States a hospital is located. In the mid-Atlantic region, for example, certified music therapists cost about \$65 per hour, and a typical session with each infant would last for 10 to 15 minutes, she said.

"In terms of the cost, when you're able to better regulate [a preemie's] vital signs, that's going to lead to less days in the hospital and less expense for [medications]," she added.

More information: The American Music Therapy Association offers more information about [music therapy](#).

[Abstract](#)

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