

Babies cry less with to skin-to-skin contact, says behavioral psychologist

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It appears beneficial for mothers and babies to have one hour of skin-to-skin contact per day in the first five weeks after birth. Mothers who do so may experience less anxiety and fatigue and often continue to

breastfeed for longer. Their babies cry less and may sleep longer. These are the conclusions of behavioral psychologist Kelly Cooijmans, who defended her Ph.D. dissertation at Radboud University on 17 November.

In skin-to-skin contact, the baby is laid on the parent's bare chest wearing only a nappy. Previous research has already clearly shown that this type of contact can have positive results when applied between a parent (the mother or other parent/guardian) and a [premature baby](#) (a baby born too early).

It showed that [babies](#) who experience this contact may grow faster and are less likely to be ill, reducing the time they have to spend in an incubator. Similar positive effects have now been found among healthy, full-term babies (babies born between the 37th and 42nd week of pregnancy) when skin-to-skin contact is applied directly after birth.

In her Ph.D. research, Kelly Cooijmans researched the effects of daily skin-to-skin contact over a longer time period. The [mothers](#) and full-term babies who participated in the study had one hour of skin-to-skin contact per day during the first five weeks after birth.

Crying less

The results are very promising, claims Cooijmans. "An hour of skin-to-skin contact per day can be hard for parents to fit into their [daily routine](#). But if it is possible, it is really worthwhile. For example, we observed that babies who had daily skin-to-skin contact after birth cried less each periods of crying in the first twelve weeks than babies who did not receive such contact. This group may also have slept slightly more in the first five weeks."

Mothers who laid their baby on their skin for one hour per day over at least four of the first five weeks also appeared to exclusively breastfeed

(i.e. solely breastfeed; no formula or solids) for over a month longer. Including mothers who supplemented breastfeeding with other foods, the total breastfeeding duration of all mothers who engaged in skin-to-skin contact was over two months longer than average in the first year of life. "Breastfeeding has all sorts of health advantages for both mothers and babies," says Cooijmans.

Finally, the behavioral psychologist also discovered that mothers who had engaged in skin-to-skin contact also felt better mentally. "We hoped that it would also have an effect on symptoms of stress, depression, and pain, but the results did not indicate this," says Cooijmans. "However, skin-to-skin contact did seem to lead to fewer symptoms of anxiety and fatigue in the first twelve weeks after birth."

Follow-up study

One-hundred sixteen pairs of mothers and babies took part in the study. The children who took part in the study are now aged six and seven, and are still being studied by the researchers. "Who knows, perhaps we can find more long-term effects," says Cooijmans. In a follow-up study, she would also like to research skin-to-skin contact by fathers or other parents or guardians, as well as the optimal duration of skin-to-skin contact.

The researcher hopes that doctors, midwives or maternity caregivers will recommend skin-to-skin contact more to new parents. "In some countries, babies are carried in special slings or wraps in the first years of life, also directly touching the skin. In the Netherlands, this is not so usual, although it is increasing. It is a simple intervention that could go a long way for parents and babies. Because daily skin-to-[skin contact](#) doesn't seem to be feasible for everyone, it would be good to investigate how we can better support parents in this."

Provided by Radboud University

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