

KANGAROO CARE

By Dianne I. Maroney

Holding a newborn infant is one of the most precious moments shared between a parent and child. Unfortunately, parents of premature infants miss out on many of these precious moments in the NICU. Kangaroo care, also called skin-to-skin holding or kangarooing, is one way to create a closeness between you and your preemie that you both might have missed.

Kangaroo care was first started in Bogota, Columbia because of lack of bed space and equipment to care for preemies. It was brought to the United States in the late 1980's. During Kangaroo care the mother, or father, sits in a comfortable chair with their preemie (dressed only in a diaper) lying upright on their bare chest. If you're shy don't worry, you can wear a shirt that opens in the front and drape a light blanket over both of you for more privacy. Kangarooing usually lasts about 20-30 minutes, but you can relax together as long as you both are comfortable and your baby remains stable. Your preemie does not have to be a certain age to begin kangaroo care; however, he must be stable enough to tolerate the handling needed when transferring him to your chest. Even preemies who are on a ventilator can do skin-to-skin holding.

Kangaroo care can benefit your preemie in many ways. Skin-to-skin holding promotes more consistent heart and respiratory rates, it stabilizes oxygen needs, improves weight gain and helps increase breast milk supply. Research has also shown that Kangaroo care helps preemies regulate their "neurological state" which means they can go through sleep and wake cycles easier. Besides the wonderful physical effects, skin-to-skin holding creates a very special bond between infant and parent. Parents often say they feel especially connected to their infants during kangaroo care. They say it's an active way to parent, to grow in their attachment, and to move through their grief following the birth of their sick infant.