

## Neonatology

# Probiotic drops for Babies - Information for families

Your views are most important and we want to keep you fully informed about how we plan to care for your baby. This leaflet explains some important feeding issues in premature babies and the use of probiotics.

### **What is different about feeding premature babies?**

We know that premature babies tolerate milk best if it is introduced gradually. Some babies find digesting milk difficult and take longer than others to manage this. Most babies remain well, but around 2-5% of very low birthweight babies can become unwell with a condition called 'NEC' (**N**ecrotising **E**ntero**C**olitis) in which there is inflammation of the gut.

Many babies who get NEC recover fully, but it can sometimes be serious, sometimes needs an operation, and can occasionally be life-threatening.

### **What can we do to try to prevent NEC?**

Your choice in how you will feed your baby is one important factor. Breast milk is the best milk for your baby. It reduces the risks of bowel problems; including NEC. Even small amounts of breast milk are important for your baby. Early expression of breast milk starting as soon as possible after birth and ongoing frequent expression of breast milk are important for optimal early nutrition of your baby and successful lactation. We will support and encourage you if you choose to express breast milk. If you are unable to or choose not to express breast milk we will advise on the most suitable alternatives.



## Patient Information

### **What are probiotics?**

“Healthy” live bacteria are called probiotics. There is now increasing evidence that giving preterm babies small amounts of ‘healthy’ live bacteria in their milk (like those bacteria found in live yoghurts and probiotic drinks that are now available in supermarkets) reduces the risk of NEC, including in babies receiving breast milk.

### **Are probiotics a standard treatment?**

Using probiotics in babies has been standard treatment in many neonatal units worldwide for many years. A growing number of neonatal units in the UK give probiotics routinely to babies less than 32 weeks gestation at birth and/or less than 1500g at birth.

### **What do we know about probiotics and babies?**

Probiotics have been extensively studied in several thousand preterm babies. Evidence clearly shows that probiotic bacteria help reduce the incidence of NEC by more than 50%, and reduce mortality. This means that probiotics appear to protect babies against NEC and improve their survival chances.

### **Are there any risks of being given probiotics?**

The studies show that probiotics are safe to give when babies are being given milk, even in the smallest babies. Very rare cases of infection from giving the probiotic live bacteria have been reported but they are usually easy to treat. In the unlikely event that this happens we have antibiotics available that kill the probiotic bacteria.

### **Are there any risks from not getting probiotics?**

If your baby does not get probiotics, current evidence suggests that, on average, he/she may be at an increased risk of developing NEC compared to a baby of similar size/gestational age that is given probiotics. However, most premature babies do not get NEC even without probiotics, and giving probiotics will not prevent all cases of NEC.

## Patient Information

### **How do we give probiotics?**

We plan to start giving your baby the probiotics drops when they are tolerating a little milk. We will normally carry on giving it with the milk feeds until your baby reaches 34 weeks corrected age, or until their discharge/transfer, whichever is sooner.

If your baby is transferred back to another hospital before 34 weeks corrected age, it is possible that on-going probiotic treatment will not be available after transfer as some other units do not use probiotics.

Although probiotics are classed as food supplements in the UK, the production and quality control of the probiotic we will give to your baby meets the highest standards as used in the manufacture of medicinal products.

### **Who should I ask if I have any queries?**

The Doctors and Nurses on the Neonatal unit should be able to answer any questions you might have.

The Trust has access to interpreting and translation services. If you need this information in another language or format please contact 02476966668 and we will do our best to meet your needs.

The Trust operates a smoke free policy.

To give feedback on this leaflet please email [feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk](mailto:feedback@uhcw.nhs.uk)

#### **Document History**

Department:	Neonatology
Contact:	D26668
Updated:	June 2021
Review:	June 2024
Version:	1
Reference:	HIC/LFT/2571/21