Kangaroo Care
What is Kangaroo Care?
Kangaroo care is skin-to-skin contact between parent and baby. During kangaroo care, your diaper-clad baby is placed on your bare chest and covered by your clothing or a blanket. This skin-to-skin care simulates the protective, nurturing environment of the kangaroo pouch. Kangaroo care complements medical care by promoting early family bonding. Although primarily used in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) for preterm infants (born at 37 weeks gestational age or earlier), kangaroo care can be done with any infant.
Why is kangaroo care important?

“Because of all the apparatus, it was difficult at times to see these babies as our own children. Kangaroo care made us feel so much closer to them and provided us with a real opportunity to start parenting our children.”
—Parent of premature twin daughters

Studies have shown that kangaroo care offers many physical and emotional benefits to both parent and child. Kangaroo care helps to establish early bonding between parent and child. This natural process of attachment is often delayed for preterm infants isolated in incubators in intensive care units. Additionally, the warm, contained position of your baby when held in kangaroo care reduces his or her stress and promotes relaxation. This relaxation helps to stabilize your baby’s breathing, heart rate and oxygenation levels. Your calming, familiar presence during kangaroo care encourages deep, regular sleep in your baby. For preterm infants, deep sleep is an important aid to continued growth, maturation and weight gain.
Kangaroo care also provides real benefits for you as a parent. Through kangaroo care you are able to comfort your baby in a very special way. Kangaroo care allows you to develop your parenting skills. For interested mothers, kangaroo care also facilitates breastfeeding. After several kangaroo care sessions, you may feel more comfortable handling your baby and taking care of his or her daily needs. In addition, by taking part in your preterm baby’s care, you may begin to feel confident about your ability to care for your baby when he or she is ready to go home.
When may I provide kangaroo care for my baby?

“We couldn’t hold our baby at first. She was so fragile. It was hard to be patient, but she had a few milestones to reach before she was ready.”
—Parent of premature daughter

For preterm infants, there are medical guidelines that must be met before kangaroo care may begin. These guidelines will help to determine if your baby’s medical condition is stable. Your healthcare provider will discuss these guidelines with you and determine your baby’s readiness for kangaroo care.

If your baby is being monitored by external devices, such as cardiac/respiratory or oxygen-saturation monitors, this monitoring will continue during kangaroo care. The NICU staff also will check your baby regularly for signs of stress or changes in body temperature.
How do I begin?
“The nurses were always nearby and ready to help, but they respected our privacy, too. We were nervous in the beginning, but we wanted to hold her. This was important family time for us.”
—Parent of premature daughter

Your baby’s nurse will help you get started when you begin to provide kangaroo care for your baby. Wear a top or shirt that buttons in the front. A hospital gown—worn backwards so the opening is in the front—also may be used. Mothers may choose to remove their bras. You will sit in a comfortable chair next to your baby’s incubator. Your baby’s nurse will then remove your baby from the warmer or incubator and place him or her, wearing only a diaper, on your bare chest. Your baby will be covered with a blanket, or you may choose to arrange your clothing around you both. Screens are available for your privacy.

During your first few kangaroo care sessions, it is generally best if you remain quiet and do not rock the chair while you hold your baby. Too much stimulation may tire a preterm infant and lessen the calming, beneficial effects of kangaroo care.
How often and how long may I do kangaroo care?

“My husband would come in evenings. It was important for him to hold her then because he couldn’t be with her in the daytime. She would nuzzle in his chest hairs, and you could actually watch the monitors calm down. The beeping would stop, and she would sleep. Sometimes she would snore!”

—Parent of premature daughter

Kangaroo care visits can take place any time of day and may be adapted to fit your schedule. The frequency and the length of each session may vary according to your baby’s response. Parents are encouraged to begin with 60 minutes once a day. You may increase the frequency and length of your kangaroo care as your baby grows stronger.

If you have any questions about providing kangaroo care for your baby, or if you would like to read more on the subject, please contact your baby’s nurse.
BARBARA WOODWARD LIPS PATIENT EDUCATION CENTER

Mrs. Lips, a resident of San Antonio, Texas, was a loyal patient of Mayo Clinic for more than 40 years. She was a self-made business leader who significantly expanded her family’s activities in oil, gas and ranching, even as she assembled a museum-quality collection of antiques and fine art. She was best known by Mayo staff for her patient advocacy and support.

Upon her death in 1995, Mrs. Lips paid the ultimate compliment by leaving her entire estate to Mayo Clinic. Mrs. Lips had a profound appreciation for the care she received at Mayo Clinic. By naming the Barbara Woodward Lips Patient Education Center, Mayo honors her generosity, her love of learning, her belief in patient empowerment and her dedication to high-quality care.