

A Parents' Guide to Understanding: Probiotics

Probiotics in preterm infants

This leaflet provides information for the parents of babies born prematurely about the use of regular probiotic treatment.

What is the medication called and what is it used for?

Probiotics are harmless bacteria that live in our gut, and help to keep our intestines healthy. Probiotics can stop harmful bacteria growing in the intestine and can help prevent conditions such as diarrhoea (gastroenteritis) and necrotising enterocolitis (NEC).

It is a treatment that contains the friendly bacteria that would usually be found in the intestine of breast-fed babies born at term. It is similar to drinking live yoghurt products. The bacteria are obtained by purifying a yoghurt type liquid so that your baby does not receive the milk part of the yoghurt.

How is it taken?

The product is given with milk feeds.

How often should it be taken?

It is given daily until your baby reaches 34 weeks corrected age, or may be continued if there are difficulties with tolerating milk feeds.

What are the benefits?

Preterm babies frequently have unusual bacteria in their intestines, often as a result of other treatments we need to use, such as antibiotics. These unusual bacteria can increase the risks of serious diseases such as Necrotising Enterocolitis (NEC), which is a severe inflammatory disease of the bowel. Probiotics work by replacing these with normal bacteria, and by strengthening your baby's immune response to infection.

There is good research evidence that probiotics protect babies, reducing NEC by 30%, and improving babies' ability to tolerate milk feeds.

What are the side effects?

Research has shown probiotics to be safe. There are no known risks or side effects to taking probiotics. The treatment may be temporarily stopped if your baby becomes unwell or feeds are stopped for any reason.

What are the alternatives?

There are no alternatives to probiotics; there is however a number of different brands supplying probiotics. If you would like further information on the probiotic your baby is receiving please speak to the nurse/doctor looking after your baby.

Who to contact if you have any more questions

Please feel free to discuss this with the nurse caring for your baby or the consultant on duty, who will answer any queries you might have.

South West Neonatal Network

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