

Feeding Development in infants with CHD

ORIGINAL ARTICLE: *Disruptions in the Development of Feeding for Infants with Congenital Heart Disease*
JONES CE ET AL., CARDIOLOGY IN THE YOUNG, 2020

NOTE: This is a short and simple summary of a research article. It is not a full guide and does not include everything from the original article. The goal is to help families understand the main ideas of the research in a way that is easy to read and use. If you have questions about how this information applies to your child, please talk to your healthcare team.

WHY FEEDING MATTERS

Feeding is an important part of a baby's growth, development, and bonding with caregivers. Babies with CHD often struggle with feeding due to their heart condition, medical treatments, and hospital environment. These challenges can affect their nutrition, weight gain, and overall health.

WHY BABIES WITH CHD HAVE TROUBLE FEEDING

Several factors can make feeding more difficult for babies with CHD:

Digestive Issues

Babies with CHD are more likely to experience acid reflux, stomach problems, and difficulty digesting milk or formula.

Nutrition Issues

Nutrients from food help babies heal after surgery and support healthy brain development. Some babies need temporary feeding tubes to help them get enough nutrition. A feeding tube can be a useful tool to help your baby reach nutrition goals while you continue to work on feeding goals.

Swallowing Difficulties

Some babies who have had complex heart surgeries have trouble swallowing, known as dysphagia. The muscles and nerves that help your baby swallow safely can be disrupted during heart surgery. Your medical team may request a swallow study to make sure milk is going towards your baby's stomach and not towards their lungs.

Heart and Lung Differences

CHD can cause breathing difficulties, lower oxygen levels, and fatigue, making it hard for babies to suck, swallow, and breathe at the same time.

Surgery and Medical Treatments

Some babies need surgery early in life, which may delay feeding. Medicines can cause drowsiness or nausea, making babies less interested in eating.

Sensory and Developmental Delays

CHD can affect brain development, which can cause a delay in feeding skills and learning to eat. They may also be sensitive to touch around their face and mouth, making feeding stressful. Some babies with CHD may have difficulty calming down or staying focused while feeding due to how their brain develops.

HOW FEEDING CHALLENGES AFFECT BABIES AND FAMILIES

Slow weight gain: Babies with CHD may burn more calories due to their heart condition and may not eat enough to keep up with their energy needs.

Feeding Selectivity: Many children with CHD continue to have picky eating or difficulty eating solid foods as they grow. With time and guidance, many children with CHD can improve their eating skills.

Emotional Stress: Feeding challenges can be frustrating for both babies and caregivers. Parents may feel stressed, worried, or unsure how to help their child eat. It's normal to feel overwhelmed, but you are not alone, many parents face these challenges and find support through medical teams and parent groups.

WAYS TO SUPPORT FEEDING

If your baby has CHD and struggles with feeding, here are some ways to help:



Work with Feeding Specialists: Feeding therapists may suggest modifications or strategies to help your baby learn to eat safely and efficiently.

Encourage Positive Feeding Experiences: Holding, cuddling, and skin-to-skin contact can help babies feel safe and comfortable during feedings.

Monitor for Signs of Reflux or Swallowing Problems: If your baby is coughing, gagging, or having trouble breathing while eating, talk to a doctor.

Be Patient with Transitions: If your baby needs a feeding tube, they may take time to learn how to eat by mouth. The goal is to make feeding a positive experience, so using a gradual approach and paying attention to how your baby responds will set them up for long term success.

TAKEAWAY MESSAGE

Feeding a baby with CHD can be challenging, but with the right support and strategies, most babies can learn to eat and grow well. Caregivers should work closely with doctors, therapists, and dietitians to ensure their baby gets the nutrition they need. Every baby is different, and progress may take time—be patient and celebrate small wins!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

This summary was created through the collaboration of a multidisciplinary group of healthcare professionals, educators, and CHD parents within CNOC, with the support of ChatGPT (OpenAI) to help make research easier for caregivers to understand. We would also like to thank the authors of the original research article for their meaningful work.