

How to Massage a Baby

By Amy Zintl

Daily infant massage is a great way to bond with baby. What's more, researchers are finding that massage may promote better sleeping, relieve colic, and perhaps even enhance an infant's immune system, motor skills, and intellectual development. Here are some tips and techniques to help you along.

Use a blanket or towel, and lotion or massage oil in a non-breakable container. (Test the lotion or oil on a small spot of your baby's skin and wait a day to be sure no irritation appears.) Start when your baby is in a quiet yet alert state -- not immediately after a feeding or when she's sleepy. Sit on the floor with the soles of your feet together, forming a diamond shape with your legs. Drape the blanket over your feet and between your knee.

Undress your baby down to her diaper and place her on the blanket, cradling her head on your feet. Start with a gentle "hello" stroke from baby's head to her toes. If baby stiffens, cries, or becomes irritable, move to another body part or simply end the massage for the day. If she responds well, start gently massaging her body section by section.

Tummy

1. Hold your hand so your pinky's edge can move like a paddle across your baby's belly. Starting at the base of the rib cage, stroke down with one hand, then the other, in a paddle-wheel-like motion.
2. Massage her abdomen with your fingertips in a circular, clockwise motion.
3. Do the "I Love U" stroke: Trace the letter I down your baby's left side. Then trace an inverted L, stroking across the belly along the base of her ribs from her right side to her left and down. Trace an inverted U, stroking from low on the baby's right side, up and around the navel, and down the left side.
4. Walk your fingers around her navel, clockwise.
5. Hold knees and feet together and gently press knees up toward her abdomen. Rotate baby's hips around a few times to the right. (This often helps expel gas.)
6. Place hand on tummy horizontally and rock your hand from side to side a few times. **Note:** Avoid massaging tummy if the cord hasn't completely healed.

Head and Face

1. Cradling your baby's head in both hands, massage the scalp with your fingertips, as if you're shampooing. (Avoid the fontanel, the soft spot on top of baby's head.)
2. Massage her ears between your thumb and index finger.
3. Trace a heart shape on your baby's face, bringing your hands together at the chin.
4. Place your thumbs between your baby's eyebrows, and stroke out.
5. Again with your thumbs, stroke gently out over baby's closed eyelids.

6. Stroke from the bridge of the nose out over the cheeks.

7. Using your fingertips, massage the jaw in small circles.

Chest

1. Place both hands on your baby's chest and stroke outward from her sternum to her shoulders.

2. Beginning at her sternum, trace a heart shape bringing both hands up to her shoulders, then down and back together.

3. In a crisscross pattern, stroke diagonally from one side of your baby's hip, up and over the opposite shoulder, and back down to her hip.

Arms

1. With one hand, hold baby's wrist. Relax her upper arm by tapping it lightly.

2. Hold her wrist with one hand and hold your other hand in a C-shape around baby's upper arm; stroke from her shoulder down to her wrist.

3. With each hand grasping her arm, one right above the other, stroke down from shoulder to wrist with both hands rotating in opposite directions, as if you were gently wringing a towel.

4. Massage her palm, moving thumb over thumb from heel of her hand to her fingers.

5. Stroke down top of hand from wrist to fingertips. Gently squeeze and pull each finger.

6. Massage her wrist by moving your fingers in small circles.

7. Roll her arm between both your hands.

Back

1. Place baby on tummy horizontally in front of you, or lay her across your outstretched legs. Keep her hands in front of her, not at her sides.

2. With both of your hands on baby's back, move each hand back and forth (keeping them going in opposite directions) from the base of the neck to her buttocks.

3. Hold your baby's buttocks with one hand and use the other to stroke down from her neck to her buttocks.

4. Using your fingertips, massage in small circles down one side of baby's spine and up the other. Avoid pressing on her spine directly.

5. Massage her shoulders with small circular motions.

6. Massage her buttocks with big circular motions.

7. Holding your fingers like a rake, stroke down her back.

Legs

1. Lift one of her legs by the ankle and relax it by lightly tapping the upper thigh.

2. Hold her ankle with one hand and hold your other hand in a C-shape, thumb down, around your baby's upper thigh. Stroke from her thigh down to her foot.

3. With your hands grasping the leg at the thigh, one right above the other, stroke down from hip to foot with both hands rotating in opposite directions, as if you were wringing a towel.

4. On the sole of her foot, use a thumb-over-thumb motion to massage from heel to toes.

5. Use your whole hand to stroke the bottom of her foot from heel to toes.

6. Stroke the top of her foot. Gently squeeze and pull each toe.

7. Massage around her ankle using small circles.

8. Roll her leg between your hands, as if you're rolling dough.

General Tips

- Make strokes gentle but firm, and not ticklish.
- Build massage into your baby's daily schedule.
- Follow baby's signals about when to stop.

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