

# rub a dub dub

Infant massage, for your little cub

writer: maria barrios

For grown-ups, a massage symbolizes luxury and relaxation. While we enjoy the benefits of a day at the spa, we might not dwell on the positive impact of touch on our mood and overall wellbeing. Human touch helps release mood-enhancing chemicals in adults; it does oh so much more for babies.

In addition to calming a fussy or colicky newborn, infant massage also helps babies to gain weight. This is particularly helpful for preemies, according to Janel Gantner, an RN and Certified Infant Touch and Massage Instructor (CITMI) who teaches at the Tender Touch Infant Massage.

Gantner witnessed the benefits of infant massage first-hand as a nurse in the NICU at Memorial Medical Center where she saw a colleague perform and teach it to parents. “That is where I really saw the benefits,” says Gantner. “Parents were often afraid to touch their baby. The babies in the NICU are often so small—they might start out at one pound or one and a half pounds at birth at a mere 24 weeks gestation. Not only did infant massage help the infants to gain weight, it gave parents confidence in their parenting skills and also helped facilitate the parent-infant bond—which is particularly important when families are thrown the curve ball of premature delivery.”

## a family affair

Your baby doesn't need to be a preemie in order to benefit from infant massage; all babies and parents can benefit. Massage increases an infant's blood flow, helps stimulate weight gain, provides an increased tolerance to touch stimulation, helps with relaxation, aids the digestive system, reduces colic symptoms, offers an overall boost to the immune system, and last (but certainly not least) can result in deeper and longer sleep. The benefits for parents are also startling. According to Gantner, the release of certain chemicals (i.e. serotonin and dopamine) as a result of the contact can aid a mom struggling with post partum depression.

Infant massage is also wonderful for new dads, particularly if the mom is breastfeeding. “It gives dad the feeling that he can do something for the baby,” says Gantner. For working parents, infant massage is a nice time for both parent and infant to reconnect. “Many other things, such as bathing and feeding, are task-oriented,” says Gantner. “This gives you an opportunity to spend quality time with the baby, which helps to facilitate bonding. This is particularly excellent for adoptive parents.”

What drew new mother Tamara Warren of Metairie to learn infant massage was that her daughter was not sleeping well. “I was looking for something that I could do in the evening that would be a cue to her that it was time to wind down for bedtime,” says Tamara.

Tamara has found that infant massage is also useful when eight-month-old Whitney is tense. “I noticed that she is a little stressed when I pick her up from daycare,” she says. “So I perform infant massage when we get home to help relax her.”

Expectant mom Brooke Muntean of Marigny hopes that infant massage will help facilitate bonding and relaxation. “I plan on using it as a bonding technique, to calm and relax her before bedtime,” Brooke says. “I hope to use it for soothing in general—so when she is fussy or crying. I am a firm believer in massage and Eastern methods of massage—I think there are probably benefits that we don't know about like aiding brain development and overall health.”

## seek professional help

Sure, you can go it alone or seek some guidance from books, but hands-on learning




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seems, well, apropos for infant massage. Fern Halford, LCSW, teaches the practice at the Parenting Center at Children's Hospital and says that an infant massage class can grant parents a means of ensuring that they are using the correct techniques and strokes.

"In my class I utilize Yoga, reflexology, and Swedish massage techniques," says Halford. "While you can learn some of these techniques on your own, it is important in performing the strokes that you have a model to show and illustrate the correct way to perform the technique. In a class, questions can be asked and thoughts compared."

In a first session with Halford, parents are taught techniques and strokes that focus on the legs, feet, and tummy. The focus on the tummy helps relieve gas and colic. It also helps the infant to have a bowel movement. In the second session parents are taught techniques that concentrate on the chest, arms, and hands. In the third session parents start from the beginning (legs, feet, and tummy) and continue through to chest, arms, hands, and then add techniques for the infant's face and back. Between sessions parents practice what they have learned at home. This way they are establishing a regular routine with their infant.

The Parent Center at Slidell Memorial Hospital offers infant massage classes four times a year. Parents meet once and are taught 32 massage strokes specifically designed for infants from birth through age six months.

According to Halford, babies who benefit from infant massage seem to be happier. "If you look at the benefits—improvement of circulation, releasing of endorphins, help with stress, and a deepening of the parent/infant bond—how can it not produce happier babies?," asks Halford. 

## TRY THIS AT HOME

Curious, but not quite ready to sign up for a class? Try the Waterfall.

1. First put the baby in your lap lying on his tummy or up on your chest (you want access to your baby's back).
2. Take the palm of your hand and run it down the center of the baby's back. When the first hand reaches the bottom of his spine, your other hand follows beginning at his neck—therefore giving continuous contact between your hands and the baby (like a waterfall).

*Note: Use food grade oil when performing infant massage. Any oil that is food grade works well because the baby can easily get it in his mouth, so you don't want to use anything that is mineral or petroleum based; peanut oil or other nut-based oil should also not be used due to allergy concerns. Both grape seed oil and sunflower oil work well.*

For more information on infant massage classes: Janel Gantner, Tender Touch Infant Massage, 504.214.7960 [www.tendertouchinfantmassage.com](http://www.tendertouchinfantmassage.com) Parent Center, Slidell Memorial Hospital, 985.649.8529 Parenting Center at Children's Hospital, 504.896.9591



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