Swaddling a newborn promotes sleep and keeps the baby calm: A truth or a myth?

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Swaddling a newborn promotes sleep and keeps the baby calm: A truth or a myth?

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Abstract

Swaddling is a traditional way of wrapping the baby in a cloth that helps them to remain calm and eliminate anxiety. It promotes sleep but at the same time can also be associated with certain risks such as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Swaddling can be beneficial but measures are required to minimize known risks. Swaddling can be favorable in the initial few weeks but it should be discontinued once the baby starts to roll from its back. The aim of this paper is to educate families regarding the proper technique of swaddling; its pros and cons. Further research is still needed regarding the effects of swaddling newborns.

Keywords: Swaddling; newborn

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Introduction

As nurses, during our maternity clinical rotations, we observed newborns being routinely swaddled by the health care staff. We also noticed mothers swaddling their newborns as it is a traditional practice in most families in Pakistan [1]. We were interested to learn more and interviewed 7 mothers in the postnatal ward to learn their reasons for swaddling. 3 out of 7 mothers stated that they believe in swaddling as instructed by their mother and mother-in-law because the baby does not cry if swaddled. The other 3 out of 7 mothers knew about swaddling and that it helps calm the baby, but a proper technique is needed because it can be dangerous for the newborn. On inquiring further, one of the mothers said that her niece was diagnosed with hip dysplasia when she was 5 months old. According to the doctor, the reason behind this was that the swaddling cloth was wrapped too tightly for a longer period that restricted normal hip and thigh development. Consequently, the mother was careful while swaddling her child to avoid this complication. We asked the registered midwife who stated it is a long-standing common practice in our culture. On enquiring, a consultant said that there are mixed views and it depends on cultural background and individual choice. After hearing various opinions, we became quite curious to learn more about swaddling, its risks and benefits. On interviewing we learned that swaddling can have negative impacts, thus we decided to teach people about do’s and don'ts so they would understand the proper technique of rolling and wrapping the baby to minimize the associated risks.

Background information about swaddling

Swaddling is a conventional method of keeping a baby warm and calm by wrapping them in a clean blanket [2]. Only the body of the baby should be in the blanket, not the head and neck. The purpose of swaddling is to keep the baby cozy and sheltered, the way it was in the womb.

Swaddling is practiced in a few countries around the world. In the United States of America, babies between 0-3 months of age are swaddled. The research on swaddling the baby continues because there is conflicting evidence about its effects. About 200 babies lose their lives from SIDS each year in the UK because of unsafe sleeping position, co-sleeping, overwrapping and swaddling [3].

Studies have shown mixed views about the positive and negative impact of swaddling on infant’s health. Swaddling calms the infant
and helps in advancing sleep but at the same time if swaddle is wrapped too tightly around the hip it may result in hip dysplasia at times [3]. Babies swaddled feel secure like they were in the mother’s womb however, their response is delayed which includes restricted arm movement and they feed less frequently [4]. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics it is recommended to avoid wrapping the cloth too tightly while the child is sleeping to reduce the risk of SIDS [4].

Safe swaddle is crucial to reduce the likelihood of certain negative outcomes including SIDS, hip dysplasia, and suffocation and overheating. 10 out of 18 incidents that related to swaddling included infants being placed supine who rolled into a prone position [3]. No deaths were attributed to SIDS; most were positional asphyxia [3]. The rest were either positioned prone or there were problems in the sleep environment as reported to the US Consumer Product Safety Commission between 2004 and 2012 [3]. According to the 2011 AAP SIDS Task Force Technical Reports, swaddling may be an approach to soothe the baby yet it cannot be used to reduce the incidence of SIDS [4]. Parents swaddle their baby so that they can have a peaceful sleep but reduced arousability of the baby can increase the risk for SIDS [5]. This is why it is very important to swaddle safely.

Swaddling not only increases the risk for SIDS but is also associated with hip dysplasia [4]. It is important for normal growth and development that babies move their legs and bend at the hip [6]. Swaddling the baby for prolonged periods will not give space for the baby's legs to move or bend. It is necessary for a baby’s legs to be in a natural “frog style” position [7]. The baby’s legs should be flexed rather than confined to a straight position. This will help in avoiding hip joint problems in the child.

Swaddling can also cause breathing difficulties including suffocation for the baby. Babies that are swaddled tightly around the chest, can have trouble with breathing which can cause major harm to them. However, if the swaddling cloth is too loose the baby can move out of it and could be suffocated or strangulated. Also bed sharing with a swaddled baby can be harmful as overheating can occur which is another risk factor for SIDS [6]. The risk for SIDS increases along with an increase in unintentional suffocation [7]. There is also some evidence that if swaddling is done too tightly it can increase the risk for respiratory infections. Swaddling right after birth results
in delayed breastfeeding, less successful suckling and reduced intake of breastmilk [8].

**Implications for health care providers**

The health care staff should know both the benefits and the associated risks of swaddling so they can guide new families in safe use of this practice. If swaddling is desired by families or care providers it should be done correctly. It is advisable for the infant to sleep on his/her side or face up while swaddled. Suitable clothing and material such as soft cotton fabric should be used for swaddling the baby. Extra layers of blanket or other fabrics are not needed that could lead to suffocation. The swaddling fabric should not cover the head and neck. Also tie the material gently around the baby rather than tightly as it can harm the knees and hips. Swaddling sleep sack (Fig 1) can be recommended if swaddling is required for a long time [9]. The mother should be advised to check the baby’s temperature to avoid overheating [6]. It is essential to swaddle the infants firmly to avoid the risk of choking.

**Conclusion**

Swaddling is a long-used method that continues to the present. Many parents believe that it helps their baby to sleep comfortably. There is no compelling evidence that swaddling should be done, or conversely, that it should be abandoned. For many, it plays an important part in the care of newborns. Therefore, it is important to guide families about best practices and help them understand the risk associated with swaddling. They can be advised to swaddle the baby only until the infant is able to roll by themselves. Different swaddling techniques and methods should be taught to the parents.

A lot of research is still needed regarding swaddling and its impact on a newborn and association with issues like acute lower respiratory infections, vitamin D deficiency, sudden infant death syndrome etc. Also, it is the responsibility of health researchers to continue investigating the role of swaddling and its outcome.
Conflict of Interest: There is no conflict of interest to disclose.

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