**For Premature Babies, Kangaroo Care Offers a Big Boost in Health**

Kangaroos have invaded the [Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at Randall Children's Hospital at Legacy Emanuel](http://www.legacyhealth.org/health-services-and-information/health-services/for-children-a-z/neonatal-intensive-care-unit), where premature and medically fragile babies receive care -- but this is a good thing.

Pink and blue kangaroo cutouts adorn the walls in a tally of how often parents of babies in the NICU are participating in the hospital's "kangaroo-athon," a two-week campaign to raise awareness of so-called kangaroo care and its benefits for prematurely born infants and their parents.

In kangaroo care, mothers or fathers hold their babies in "skin-to-skin" mode, usually with the baby lying on the parent's chest, for as long as possible. Sophie Martinson, nurse educator for the NICU at Randall Children's, said the hospital has been encouraging the practice since at least 2007 and currently has a goal of preemies spending at least 5 percent of every 24 hours, or 72 minutes a day, in kangaroo care.

Sophie Martinson, a nurse educator at Randall Children's Hospital at Legacy Emanuel, stands before a wall adorned with kangaroo cutouts that are put up are parents log time with their babies in "kangaroo care." The photos behind her show children who were born prematurely and are now thriving. Amy Wang/The Oregonian

"All the senses are there: the smell, the touch, the sound of the heartbeat, the mother's soft voice," Martinson said. "Kangaroo care has been shown to make a baby more calm and relaxed and we see that in the vital signs." For example, babies breathe more easily, she said. They also tolerate any needed procedures better, she said.

Other ways in which kangaroo care helps babies, according to Martinson:

* It reduces the time they spend crying and increases the amount of time they spend in deep sleep
* It keeps them warm
* It keeps their heartbeat regular
* It helps them gain weight
* It improves their ability to breastfeed

Here's how kangaroo care helps parents, according to Martinson:

* It stimulates the mother's breast milk production
* It reduces stress
* It helps them feel closer to the baby
* It builds their confidence and their sense of control
* It helps with their emotional healing after the upheaval of a preterm birth

Martinson added that there's no limit on how much kangaroo care to give a preemie, or a full-term baby, for that matter.

"The transition (to skin-to-skin) is the challenging part. It takes a little time for the baby to get into that relaxed state," especially for babies who have a lot of complex medical equipment," she said. "Once they get there, you want them to get the benefit of that calming normalization."

Martinson also said kangaroo care can shorten a baby's stay in the NICU. The average stay for all babies is 22 days; for babies who weigh less than 1,500 grams, or approximately 3.3 pounds, it's 67 days.

The "kangaroo-athon" is taking place during National Prematurity Awareness Month, a campaign led by the March of Dimes. The nonprofit last week issued its [2014 Premature Birth Report Card](http://newsmomsneed.marchofdimes.org/?tag=premature-birth-report-card), which showed that Oregon's rate of premature births was 9.3 percent of all live births in 2013, below the March of Dimes' goal of 9.6 percent. Nationwide, the rate of premature births was 11.4 percent in 2013, the lowest in 17 years, according to the March of Dimes.

-- Amy Wang

<http://www.oregonlive.com/kiddo/index.ssf/2014/11/for_premature_babies_kangaroo.html>