

Recommended Oral Feeding Pathway in the NICU

A cue-based approach focused on safety, coordination, and quality over quantity



1 Before offering a feed, assess readiness

- ✓ Physiologically stable
- ✓ Awake, alert, or appropriately arousable
- ✓ Shows feeding readiness cues
- ✓ Able to sustain non-nutritive sucking
- ✓ Respiratory status supports oral feeding per unit practice

Ready to feed?

NO

YES



Not ready yet



Offer non-nutritive sucking or positive oral experiences



Support containment, regulation, and rest



Reassess at the next care time



Consider discussion with feeding team if concerns persist



Offer oral feed and watch the baby, not the bottle

A Physiologic stability



- HR, RR, oxygen saturation
- Color
- Work of breathing

B Engagement and cues



- Calm/organized state
- Rooting/interest
- Ability to stay engaged
- Stress cues

C Coordination



- Suck-swallow-breathe pattern
- Pacing needs
- Gulping/coughing/choking
- Milk loss/spillage

D Endurance and quality



- Fatigue
- Ability to recover after breaks
- Feeding duration
- Overall quality of feed

Feeding remains safe and organized?

YES

NO



Continue cue-based progression

Advance feeding opportunities as tolerated and continue to reassess each feed.



Pause and support



Pause and pace



Slow flow if appropriate



Reposition



Give breaks



Reassess coordination and stability

Improves with support?

YES

NO



Stop the feed



Gavage remainder if ordered



Protect the airway



Respect stress cues and fatigue



Stopping is not failure



When to consider feeding team / provider input

- Repeated stress cues or physiologic instability
- Persistent poor coordination
- Coughing/choking or concern for unsafe swallowing
- Limited progress to full oral feeds
- Parent or staff concern about feeding safety



Document the why

- Volume taken
- Pacing required
- Stress cues observed
- Work of breathing / desats / brady events
- Fatigue or disengagement
- Why the feed was stopped



A successful feeding is not measured only in milliliters. It is measured by safety, coordination, stability, and the baby's ability to feed without being pushed past their limits.

