

Physiotherapy Tips for Toddlers

We all know the importance of airway clearance, or physio, for little ones with cystic fibrosis (CF). However, as babies grow, getting physio done can become more difficult. Even a baby who has been in a good routine with physio in the early days may become harder to manage once they start to explore by crawling and later walking.

Create a Routine

Having a solid routine in place when your baby is young is the framework for physio success when they get older. You may still have tricky days, or even weeks, but a good routine is the best place to start. Physio should ideally be performed at the same time each day, in the same place, or at least with some of the same things, like a familiar pillow or blanket. Even using the same book or music for physio can help create a sense of routine. Sometimes this won't be possible but if things happen in a similar pattern on most days this will help your child feel more secure.

Being creative, flexible and having a sense of humour during physio sessions can help make them more effective and enjoyable. Some days will be easy, and others will be difficult, but consistency and using some of the strategies below will help keep things positive:

Get Your Child Ready for Physio

It is important to allow time to get your child ready to do physio. If they're feeling excited and full of energy it will be hard to get them to lie down and do their



treatment. Spending a few minutes getting them calm, focused and ready to start will save you time in the long run. You can read more about this [here](#). Calming activities may include reading a story, calming music, gentle swinging or a walk in the stroller.

Make Physio a Special Time

Try to make physio a special time where your child has your undivided attention. This can be very difficult with other children, so try to time physio for when there is another adult to help, during sibling's nap time or set siblings up with an activity they can manage themselves.

- Try to keep physio positive with lots of cuddles, smiles and laughter. Singing, rhymes and storytelling are also useful.
- A special physio teddy, or other toy can be useful to become a positive part of the routine. You might like to watch their favourite show together.

Break Physio Down

Break up physio into shorter timeframes, or sets, with a reward at the end of each set. Sets might be timed, or they could be a certain number of blows, depending on your routine. E.g. after each set you could read a couple of pages of a book, colour in a star on a reward chart or put a ball of playdough into a bowl. This helps your child understand what to expect, and when physio will finish. At the end of 3 sets they get a reward, such as a sticker or playing with the playdough. If your child struggles to tolerate the full length of time, or number of breaths or blows, start with a smaller target and slowly increase as they become more tolerant. [Click here](#) to use our printable physio rewards chart.

End of Physio Ritual

Use the sound of a timer, a special song or a verbal cue such as “1,2,3 done” to indicate the end of physio. This helps your child understand when physio has been completed and gradually accept physio.

After your physio session, it is also helpful to introduce a special activity to use as a positive association to physio. This could be reading a story together, a yummy treat, singing a song or giving them a sticker. Find something that suits your child’s interests. Active play is also an important part of keeping your child healthy and can be used as a reward. This may include climbing, running, jumping, ball play etc. At this age, instant rewards are more effective than bigger weekly ones. Ensure you also reward them with lots of praise for completing physio.

Dealing with Resistance

Toddlers are well known for wanting to get their own way. It is better to develop positive reinforcement strategies while your child is young, such as distraction, ignoring undesirable behaviour, and giving lots of praise to keep things positive. Start by giving your child some control, such as where they would like to sit or which book they would like to read. You can also offer choices during physio e.g. “now we can do pats on your back or pats on your side. Which one would you like to do first?”.

Try to anticipate when your child starts to get fidgety or upset, and distract them by changing the pace e.g. “time to sit up for a cuddle now”, then get back into it once they are calmer. Remain neutral if they refuse to do physio. Avoid yelling or pleading, instead, remind them of their reward and explain the consequences for not completing physio, such as not being able to watch their favourite show or get a sticker on their chart.

Support

If you are finding physio difficult, make sure you discuss with your CF team. If you would like further support, please contact CFWA, as we have various programs which may be suitable for your family, including our Home Care Worker and Calm Kids, Happy Families programs.

Useful Resources

- [Managing Treatment Adherence](#) (CF Baby Steps)
- [Calm Kids, Happy Families](#) (CFWA Occupational Therapist Program)
- [HCW program](#) (CFWA)

Last reviewed February 2021.

Cystic Fibrosis WA
E: info@cfwa.org.au

Disclaimer: This publication is for general education and information purposes. Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.
© Cystic Fibrosis Western Australia 2021