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Mother-newborn separation at birth in hospitals: A possible risk for neurodevelopmental disorders?

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Highlights

- Mother's odour, touch and voice can naturally reduce birth stress.
- First postnatal hours may be a particularly sensitive period for human neonates.
- Early maternal separation may be implicated in neurodevelopmental disorders.
- Early separation-induced stress may induce harmful epigenetic changes.
- Keeping mothers and babies together 24 h a day.

Abstract

In the 20th century, mother-infant separation shortly after birth in hospitals became routine and unique to humans. However, this hospital birth practice is different from the practice in our evolutionary history, where newborn survival depended on close and essentially continuous maternal contact. This time shortly after birth represents a psychophysiological sensitive or critical period for programming future physiology and behaviour. We hypothesize that early maternal separation as conducted in conventional hospital practice may induce similar epigenetic changes similar to those found in various mental diseases that may also be implicated in neurodevelopmental disorders.

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