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Defining neonatal pain: The way forward

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For several decades, all forms of pain occurring in the newborn age groups have been considered equal. Newborns include extremely preterm “micropremies”, more mature preterm neonates, late preterms, term neonates, postnatal term newborns upto 1 month of age, and postnatal preterm neonates upto several months of age. Each of these groups are exposed to a variety of painful experiences during the course of neonatal intensive care, yet all forms of neonatal pain are assessed and managed in the same way. An emerging scientific rationale differentiates between acute, persistent, prolonged, and chronic pain among newborns. This is based on the scientific literature for neonatal pain assessments, previous attempts to define chronic pain, as well as clinical and neurophysiological aspects of neonatal pain. This scientific framework incorporates the temporal features, localizing characteristics, primary and secondary effects of pain events, as well as the behavioral and physiological response patterns of newborns. This framework provides an initial starting point for defining the most commonly used pain terms for newborns. Further studies may revise or refine this framework based on the accumulating evidence for different types of neonatal pain.

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