

YOUR PREEMIE IN THE NICU

NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNIT

Babies born early will often begin their lives in a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). This unit in the hospital is designed for premature babies who need special care and treatment. The NICU is staffed by many specially trained healthcare professionals and includes specialized equipment needed to care for your premature infant. It is important to know that some babies born early may not need to be in a NICU at all. However, if your baby is in a NICU, your first step is to understand how she or he will be cared for and how you can help.



WHO IS CARING FOR MY BABY IN THE NICU?

Who is on the healthcare team and what are their roles in my baby's health? Some of the following people will be involved in the care of your premature baby, you, and your family in the NICU:

- **Pediatrician (or Family Physician, Nurse Practitioner, or Physician Assistant):** Your baby's primary healthcare provider during or after hospitalization.
- **Registered Nurse:** A licensed healthcare professional who has completed a nursing program. A NICU nurse has specific education and training in the care of premature and sick newborns. Some nurses, such as Nurse Practitioners and Neonatal Clinical Nurse Specialists, have received more specialized education and training.
- **Neonatologist:** A pediatrician with specialized, advanced education and training in the care of sick, or preterm, newborn babies.
- **Respiratory Therapist:** A healthcare professional trained to care for babies with breathing problems.
- **Occupational and Physical Therapists:** Healthcare professionals who specialize in working with your baby's developmental needs — such as feeding readiness, movement patterns, and other sensory and motor skills.
- **Social worker:** A professional who helps you get the information you need from your baby's healthcare team, helps you plan for discharge, can help with financial and home support issues, and specializes in helping you and your family cope with the emotional effects of your baby's stay in the NICU.
- **Lactation Consultant:** A person with special education and training who specializes in helping you learn the benefits of breastfeeding, how to feed your baby in the NICU and after you go home, and how to make feeding comfortable for you and your baby.
- **Registered Dietician:** Nutritional expert, with special education and training in pediatric nutrition, who will help to make sure that your baby is getting the proper nutrients for healthy growth and development.
- **Pharmacist:** An expert in medicines and their side effects who can answer questions about your baby's medications.



Helping Parents



Navigate The Premature Journey

WHAT EQUIPMENT IS USED IN THE NICU AND WHY?

The special NICU machines and equipment that help care for your baby can seem unfamiliar and scary. Once you understand how they work and what their function is, you may feel more comfortable and confident around them. Some of the following may be used by NICU staff in your premature infant's treatment.

- **Feeding tube:** Sometimes, if your baby is too little to be fed by mouth, nurses will place a small tube through the mouth or nose to deliver formula or breast milk into your baby's stomach.
- **Infant warmer:** This open bed has an overhead heating system to keep your baby warm and to maintain proper body temperature; also called radiant warmer.
- **Isolette or incubator:** Protecting your baby from germs, noise, and cold stress, this clear plastic crib has holes to allow doctors and nurses to examine or check your baby without picking him or her up.
- **IVs and lines:** An IV (intravenous catheter) is a thin flexible tube inserted into your baby's vein with a tiny needle. When the needle is removed, the tubing remains and carries fluids and medications to your baby's bloodstream. The IV is sometimes placed into an infant's hand, arm, foot, leg, or even scalp. If your newborn needs special medications, a bigger IV may be required. This type of IV, called a "central line," is placed in one of the larger veins.
- **Monitors:** Your newborn is attached to monitors so that the NICU staff can constantly be aware of his or her life signs. Small sticky pads secure wires leading to a machine that measures your baby's heart and breathing rates, blood oxygen level, and body temperature.
- **Bili lights:** If your baby has jaundice and high levels of a substance called bilirubin (a common newborn condition related to the liver that causes the skin and whites of the eyes to turn yellow), these bright blue lights provide treatment called phototherapy. Your baby's eyes are covered for protection.
- **Ventilator or Respirator:** This is a machine that helps your baby to breathe. It is connected to a tube that is placed into the infant's windpipe through the nose or mouth and it pumps warm, moist air into the lungs.



HOW CAN I BOND WITH MY BABY IN THE NICU?

Even though the NICU machines may seem overwhelming and frightening, it is still possible to bond with your newborn. Your baby was born early and may be given full-time care, but your bond with your baby while in the NICU is just as important as any other parent's bond with their newborn. The NICU staff will help you figure out how to do this.

The best way to start showing your baby your love is to spend time in the NICU watching your infant's behavior. Ask your nurse to explain and to show you how to do this.

Learn when your baby is stressed out and needs to rest, as well as what time of day your newborn is typically most alert. Most importantly, learn what type of attention your baby prefers from you. Depending on your infant's condition, you may be able to breastfeed, or to provide your breast milk for the baby. If your baby is stable enough, you should be able to hold him or her skin-to-skin, even if she still has some tubes. This kind of care can help you bond with your baby and may even help to keep his or her temperature and breathing more stable. The NICU staff can explain more about the many advantages of skin-to-skin care and how to do this. However, for some very premature babies, touching is very stressful. If this is the case for your baby, ask the doctors or nurses what type of contact is best. Even holding a hand or stroking your baby's head may be a gentle and reassuring touch for both of you.



THE STRESS OF HAVING A BABY IN THE NICU

As you cope with the reality that your baby needs specialized care in the NICU, it is important to understand that many parents report a wide range of strong reactions and emotions. Know that it is okay to be sad or frustrated as you try to understand what exactly is going on in the NICU. Balancing your "life outside of the NICU" may also be a real challenge. Work, other children, family members, and finances are only some of the other responsibilities that may need your attention. Even though all of this may be overwhelming to you and your loved ones, try to step back, take a deep breath, and talk with your NICU healthcare team. The family-centered care mission of many hospitals will be there to support you, to offer resources to help you and your family, and to provide comfort and care to your baby. It is also important to accept help when it's offered from family members or friends.



BECOMING AN INFORMED PARENT

Communication is so important and knowledge can be a powerful tool. Always feel free to ask questions and to learn as much as you can about your baby's condition and the routine surrounding your baby's care, to help you become well-informed parents. Some of the questions you may want to ask the neonatologist or nurses caring for your infant are:

How long will my baby be in the NICU? _____

What needs to happen before my baby can go home? (e.g., certain body temperature, feeding routine, breathing sounds) _____

What, specifically, is the problem and what can I do to help my baby? _____

What medicines will my baby have to take? _____

Will I be able to touch, feed, and hold my baby? _____

Will any follow-up be needed because of a test, procedure, or diagnosis? _____

Use the space below to write down any questions that you have about your baby.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **American Academy of Pediatrics**

www.aap.org

- **KidsHealth.org**

www.kidshealth.org/parent/system/ill/nicu_caring.html

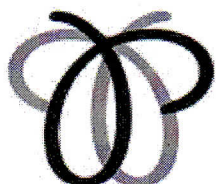
- **MarchofDimes.com**

www.marchofdimes.com/baby/inthenicu.html

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