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Apnea of Prematurity: Information for Parents

Apnea of prematurity is when your baby’s breathing pauses. It is very common for this to happen in premature babies. The more premature the baby is, the more common apnea is. The pauses in breathing may happen alone, but more commonly they happen with drops in heart rate (bradycardia) or oxygen saturations (desaturations).

Apnea can happen just because the baby is premature, or it can be a symptom of some other illness or problem. When the apnea happens alone and only once in a while, your baby’s provider will watch your baby very closely.

When the apnea happens with bradycardia or desaturations, your baby’s provider will run blood tests and possibly do other tests such as X rays, head ultrasounds, and heart sonograms (known as an *echocardiogram* or *cardiac echo*) to make sure nothing else is causing the apnea.

Many times, premature babies need medications to help their bodies remember to breathe, and sometimes they need more help from a nasal cannula, continuous positive airway pressure, or a breathing machine. Apnea often is the first symptom seen when a baby has an infection, so antibiotics may be started even before the test results come back.

Premature babies often are placed on their tummies, which helps support the chest (so they breathe easier) and helps with digesting feedings. In the neonatal intensive care unit, your baby is on monitors that will sound an alarm if the baby stops breathing or has a drop in heart rate or oxygen saturations. As your baby grows and the apnea (and other conditions) improve, your baby will be

placed on his or her back because this is the safest way for your baby to sleep and rest as he or she gets closer to going home.

Apnea usually improves as your baby gets older, but it takes longer for it to improve in some premature babies. Sometimes even after the apnea seems to have stopped, it starts again. This can happen because the baby is still immature or because of necessary tests like an eye examination. Apnea may start again (briefly) after immunizations are given. The apnea that happens after immunizations is usually very mild. It is important that your baby has eye examinations and receives immunizations to protect him or her from serious problems later on.

Sometimes apnea continues as your baby is getting closer to going home. It is important to continue watching and caring for your baby in the hospital until it is safe for your baby to go home. Babies are sometimes sent home on the medications that help them remember to breathe.

Apnea of prematurity does not mean your baby is more at risk for sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Things that increase the baby’s risk for SIDS are cigarette smoke; sleeping on their tummies; a lot of soft fluffy bedding (e.g., blankets, pillows, stuffed animals); keeping the room too warm; and sleeping with others.

It is important that you keep all of your follow-up appointments and that your baby receives immunizations at the scheduled times.