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Neonatal Sepsis: Information for Parents

*Neonatal sepsis* (you may hear it referred to simply as “sepsis”) is an infection of your baby’s bloodstream. The infection can spread throughout the body and can be very serious.

Sepsis can be caused from an infection by bacteria, viruses, and funguses. Your baby could have been infected during the pregnancy, delivery, or after the birth from being in contact with others.

During pregnancy or delivery, an infection from the mother may pass to the baby by way of the placenta or through the birth canal. If the sac around the baby starts to leak, the baby is no longer protected from infection. Once born, the baby also can get an infection from being around people who are sick or objects in the environment. Even normal “good” bacteria that live on the baby’s skin may make the baby sick. Remember that your baby is in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU). Frequently, more procedures are required for NICU babies, so there can be more opportunities for an infection to happen, even while trying to prevent infection. In addition, if the baby is pre- mature, his or her immune system, which fights bacteria, is immature and is not strong enough to fight off the bacteria, virus, or fungus. When the immune system is not strong enough to fight the infection, the baby can become quite sick.

There are many different ways a baby may show that he or she does not feel well, and each baby is different.

Some signs that your baby is not feeling well may include

* acting sluggish or more sleepy than usual (also known as *lethargy*)
* decreased breathing or breathing too fast (apnea or tachypnea) or slowing of their heart rate (bradycardia)
* not feeding well (tolerating their tube feedings or not breast/bottle feeding well)
* pale, cool, clammy skin
* not being able to keep their temperature regulated.

The NICU team is observing your baby all of the time. If you notice your baby acting differently, please let one of the team members know (e.g., nurse, provider, respiratory therapist). Don’t be afraid to talk with the team if you are concerned.

To determine whether your baby has sepsis, the NICU team may do many different tests: blood tests, urine tests, a spinal tap (also called a lumbar puncture), or X rays. Your baby may stop eating and need an IV and flu- ids. Your baby may need some help to breathe (such as oxygen or a ventilator). Antibiotics, medications given to fight the infection, may be started. The medical team will watch your baby closely and follow the test results closely. Your baby may need to have some of the tests repeated to make sure the infection is going away.

Here are some ways to help your baby fight against get- ting an infection:

* Wash your hands every time you are with your baby and especially after changing his or her diaper.
* Stay home if you do not feel well. You can call the NICU staff to check in on your baby until you are feeling better.
* Breastfeeding may help prevent infections. If you are able to supply breast milk for your baby, that is great!

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