



Parenting in the NICU

Having an infant in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) can be a stressful time for parents. Infants are admitted to the NICU for a variety of reasons, including prematurity, infection, and respiratory complications. Most of these are unexpected and distressing for the family. Parents of a sick or premature infant can experience many emotions and display different responses to their baby being in the NICU.

Common emotions and responses to having an infant in the NICU can include

- fear of the unknown
- guilt for having the baby early or feeling responsible for what happened
- grieving the loss of a typical birth experience and not having a healthy baby
- feeling helpless to comfort their infant
- fears their infant will experience pain
- frustration over being separated from their infant
- fear of the future and the financial burden a NICU admission can cause.

Parents can see the NICU as a foreign and overwhelming environment, and many have reported that the inability to hold their baby and protect him or her from experiencing pain is a great source of stress. It is important to help reduce parents' stress by giving them opportunities to be involved and to have some control in their infant's care.

Remember, parents often don't know what to ask and can be so distraught that they don't remember what was said to them. Be patient—parents may ask the same question several times.

Parents can be involved in their infant's care by

- asking questions (multiple times, if needed)
- providing routine care, such as taking their baby's temperature and changing his or her diaper
- being present and placing their hands on the baby to help console him or her during painful procedures
- providing skin-to-skin contact (kangaroo care)
- holding or feeding their baby when he or she is medically stable.

It has been shown that facilitating quality parent-infant interaction during the infant's stay in the NICU can help parents acquire a sense of confidence when taking their infant home.

Remember, too, that it is important to include fathers. Although fathers may have some of the same feelings about having a sick baby, they will outwardly react differently in most cases. Just because the father appears to have it all together does not mean he does.

Bibliography

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Parenting in the NICU: Information for Parents

Having a baby born very early or sick can be distressing for parents. The neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) can be a scary place because of all of the sounds and machines that are used. You may have many overwhelming feelings about your baby being sick: you may be feeling sad, guilty, scared, or worried about your baby and what is going to happen.

Mothers and fathers often have many of the same feelings about having a sick baby, but they will show those feelings differently—and that's OK. Be patient with each other. It's OK to ask questions—and you can ask the same question again if you don't understand or don't remember the answer.

At first, your baby may be too sick to hold, and noise and lights may be too much for him or her. One way you can help your baby is to gently touch or talk to him or her in a quiet voice. You play a very important role in your baby's care and ongoing development. Your presence at the bedside is very comforting to your baby, who knows your

voice and scent. Your voice can help your baby be calm so he or she can grow and get better. Once your baby is feeling better, the nurse will show you how to place your hands on your infant to help your baby feel secure.

As your baby feels better, the nurse will let you know when to help with your baby's care. Being involved in your baby's NICU care will help you feel more comfortable caring for your baby once you go home. There are many ways you can interact with your baby during the NICU stay, including talking, reading, and singing. You can change your baby's diaper, take his or her temperature, and possibly hold your baby. You also can give your baby skin-to-skin care, called *kangaroo care*. This will help you get to know your baby and help your baby be calm and quiet.

As your baby gets bigger and stronger, you will get to hold your baby more and feed him or her. When your baby is able to do these things, you are one step closer to going home!