



Taking Care  
of You

# Coping

Having a baby in a NICU is very stressful for parents. The uncertainty, the highs and lows, and the decisions all take their toll. If at first you feel distant from your baby, you may wonder if there is something wrong with you, or you may worry that because you cannot snuggle with your baby, you won't be able to bond.

Rest assured that feeling distant is a normal reaction for parents during the early weeks of their newborn's NICU stay. Feeling distant doesn't mean you are not bonding. Your bond with your baby began during pregnancy and continues to grow long after your baby is born. Be patient with yourself. Over time, as you adjust to the NICU, you'll feel closer and more like a parent to your baby.

As time passes and your emotions change, keep in mind that most parents of babies in the NICU feel many positive and negative feelings—even at the same time. This is because your heartfelt connection with your baby includes both joy and pain.

## The NICU Roller Coaster:

For many families, the NICU stay is like a roller coaster ride, with ups and downs, triumphs, and setbacks. The following tips may help you deal with your baby's ups and downs:

- Give yourself permission to cry and feel overwhelmed. You may worry that you'll never be able to pull yourself back together, but you will.
- Get into a routine. Find a way to balance work, home, and visiting the hospital. Allow yourself to leave your baby's side when you can. While your baby needs you, it is also important to have time to yourself, with your partner, and with your other children. Also take time to do things you enjoy, like exercise. These restful breaks will help you find the strength to keep going.
- Connect with other parents of babies in the NICU. They share many of your feelings and struggles. Talk together, informally or in a support group. Ask the NICU staff if there are parents of babies who have graduated from the NICU with whom you can connect for support, or if there are other community resources.

- Explore your spiritual side. It might be helpful to reflect and lean on your spiritual beliefs. You may find comfort talking with a pastor, priest, rabbi, minister, or imam. It is normal for this experience to challenge your religious and spiritual beliefs. However, prayer, meditation, or quiet reflection can help you find emotional strength and hope during this challenging time.
- Keep a journal. Expressing your feelings on paper can help you cope with your emotional changes. A journal also strengthens your hope and patience, by reminding you how far you and your baby have come.
- Vent your frustrations. If your baby has a setback, you may be plunged back into fear and anxiety. Voice your fears, and hope for the best.
- Celebrate when you can. When your baby makes progress, it is okay to experience the joy.
- Accept the support of others, however clumsy it may seem. Let people know how they can best help you.
- Accept that you and your partner will react differently. Share your experiences and listen with empathy so that you each can feel supported.

## You and Your Partner

During your baby's NICU stay, your partner can be your greatest source of support, but there may be times when you find it difficult to deal with each other. It's only natural that your reactions will be as unique as you are. The painful feelings so common to the NICU experience can add stress to your relationship. These tips may help you weather the crisis together:

- Share your thoughts, feelings, information, and burdensome tasks with each other. Lean on each other's strengths and forgive weaknesses. Remember that you both want what is best for your baby.
- Manage conflict with listening, compromise, and respect.
- Empathize with each other. When your partner is venting, don't try to fix it. Just listen and understand. Supporting each other is the best comfort.
- Make time to kindle and nurture your relationship, so that you can turn to it for strength.



## Parents Without Partners in the NICU

If you are separated, divorced, single, or widowed, you may feel very alone without a partner to share the burdens and the joys. You may find it difficult to be the only one handling all the information and decisions. Being a single parent, you play a role that is challenging, but very important.

All parents need support. When you don't have a partner, it is natural to confide in a trusted family member or friend about your fears and concerns. Reach out to those close to you for the help you need. A NICU parent support group or other parents of babies in the NICU also can provide you with much needed comfort and partnership.

The March of Dimes (MOD) online community for NICU families ([www.shareyourstory.org](http://www.shareyourstory.org)) offers support and information for families of babies in the NICU and who are home from the NICU. You can join in discussion with others who have very similar experiences to yours, ask questions, get support, participate in live online chats, and even offer your story and support to others.

## Postpartum Depression

As a new mother, it is normal to have many intense feelings especially while your baby is in the NICU. It is not uncommon for new mothers to find that they may react differently or more passionately to some things than they may have prior to giving birth. This is completely normal. When do you know if what you are experiencing is something more than what would be expected for this time in your life? If you are having trouble dealing with the intense feelings, you may have some level of postpartum depression.

### How do I know if I have postpartum depression?

If you have any of the following feelings, and cannot get rid of them, you may have postpartum depression:

- Sadness.
- Tiredness.
- Anger.
- Loss of hope.
- Loss of interest in things you like.
- Your ability to cope is not improving and you feel stuck.
- You find no joy in other parts of your life.
- You have trouble with your relationship with your partner or others close to you.
- You feel a parent support group isn't "quite enough."

### **It is essential to speak with a professional counselor if you**

- Feel prolonged numbness or detachment.
- Continue to feel detached from your baby.
- Have trouble getting out of bed or starting your day.
- Feel unable to cope or manage your other responsibilities.
- Think about harming yourself or others.

A professional counselor can help. Your doctor or the hospital social worker can refer you to a counselor who understands the trauma of having a baby in the NICU. Even just a couple of visits might give you the reassurance and boost you need. Visiting a counselor and asking for help is nothing to be ashamed about; it will just help you cope better.

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# Smoking and Your Baby

It is very important for you to provide a smoke-free environment for your baby. Babies' lungs are not completely mature at birth and take 2 to 3 years to develop all the small air sacs necessary for a lifetime of healthy lung function. Tobacco smoke irritates the airways of babies and affects the growth of their lungs during the first 2 to 3 years of their lives, when their lungs are continuing to develop.

Premature babies are especially prone to having lung problems after discharge from the NICU. Being exposed to tobacco smoke makes these lung problems worse and makes premature babies more prone to develop airway infections and obstruction. When their parents smoke, premature babies smoke!

Many parents think that, as long as they smoke outside, their smoking does not harm their baby, but this is not true. Even when you smoke outside, chemicals from the tobacco smoke cling to your clothes and continue to irritate babies' airways, causing inflammation and airway injury. Anyone who smokes around a baby or young child is harming their precious child with secondhand smoke.

Secondhand smoke exposure has been well documented in many research studies to cause harm to babies and children. Babies exposed to secondhand smoke have increased upper and lower respiratory illnesses, increased ear infections, increased asthma, more frequent visits to the doctor, and more hospitalizations. Babies who are exposed to cigarette smoke have twice the occurrence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome and are at increased risk for behavioral problems such as ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder).

The poisons from tobacco smoke cling to home furniture, drapes, carpets, ceilings, and walls, as well as car seats, for years. This is known as "thirdhand" smoke because it continues to "off gas" the toxic fumes for months to years later. It is important that you thoroughly clean your home and car when transforming them into smoke-free environments. A smoke-free home and car is essential for your baby to breathe safely.

Chemicals from tobacco smoke contaminate the breast milk that mothers produce. Breastfeeding is important for all babies to provide optimal nutrition and brain development as well as protection from infections. Because the protective benefits of breastfeeding are present even if a mother smokes, mothers who smoke are still encouraged to breastfeed their babies. If a mother who breastfeeds uses nicotine replacement therapy, this is much better for her baby than smoking. Of course, having no exposure to tobacco toxins is best for both mother and baby.

Babies and children who are exposed to secondhand smoke have much more serious health problems than babies or children who are not exposed to secondhand smoke. The consequences of using tobacco products is something we wish to help you avoid for both you and your baby.

Please let us know if you would like help in becoming a nonsmoker or if you have any questions about providing a smoke-free home and car for your baby. For the health of your baby and for your own health, it is essential that you and everyone in your household stop smoking.

Because tobacco products contain nicotine, which is very addictive, it is hard for most people to quit smoking. Fortunately, today there is help, which can make it easier to quit smoking, even if you have tried quitting before without success. This time you can succeed. Ask your pediatrician and call the quitline (1-800 QUIT-NOW) for help in quitting and in making your home and car smoke-free.

