

Dads and the NICU: Your special role

Your baby has arrived, but he needs special care in the newborn or neonatal intensive care unit (also called NICU). Having a baby in the NICU can be stressful and difficult for a family. As a dad, you may worry about your baby and your partner, as well as other children at home. You also may wonder how your baby's NICU stay may affect your job and how you'll pay the medical bills. Use the information here to help you learn ways to cope during your baby's time in the NICU.

What are common emotions?

You may have mixed feelings when your baby is in the NICU. You may be happy to welcome your baby but also worried and overwhelmed about what will happen next. You may feel:

- Scared about your baby's medical condition and what her future holds
- Sad about your baby being in the hospital and not at home like you planned
- Overwhelmed by being pulled in many directions. This may include supporting your partner, dealing with bills, taking care of things at home and work, spending time with your older children and spending time with your new baby.
- Worried about your partner
- Love and pride in your new baby
- Angry about the changes that a NICU stay makes in your life
- Frustrated by not being able to help your baby
- Happy about the progress she makes and the obstacles she overcomes

How can my partner, family and I get through this together?

The birth of a sick child can put stress on your relationship with your partner and your relationships with other family members. Share your feelings with your partner so you can support each other. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Men and women sometimes cope with things differently. Some men don't talk about their feelings with their partner. When this happens a woman may feel like her partner doesn't care.

- You and your partner may have similar feelings but not always at the same time. You may not always be on the "same page."
- You, your partner and your families may react differently to a situation. Talk about your feelings. Listen to each other and try to understand others' feelings.
- You, your partner and your families may not agree on how much information you want to share with friends and other family. Your partner may want to share fewer medical details than you do because she may feel responsible for her baby's condition. It's important to respect differences and decide what information you are both comfortable sharing.

How do I support my partner?

A lot happens during a NICU stay and there are many things that a mom may worry about. Your partner may need extra support and understanding. Here's how you can help:

- **Help with bonding.** In the days after your baby is born, your partner may be too tired, uncomfortable or sad to spend much time in the NICU. Or your baby may have been transferred to a different hospital where she can get more specialized care. Show your partner pictures of your baby and share details of your baby's care.
- **Be patient.** Your partner's fears, pain, tiredness and hormonal changes can make her more sensitive than usual.
- **Reassure her.** Your partner may feel responsible for and guilty about your baby's condition. Reassure, listen and support her.
- **If your partner wants to pump her breast milk, support her decision.** Help get bottles ready, make sure the milk is stored correctly and take the milk to the hospital so it's ready when your baby needs it. Breast milk is the best food for most babies and it's even better and healthier for sick babies in the NICU.
- **Encourage her to take care of herself.** She may not be getting enough rest or eating healthy foods. You can order a healthy dinner or rearrange your schedule so she can take some time for herself.

Know signs of postpartum depression (also called PPD).

Having a baby in the NICU can cause many different feelings for new moms. If your partner has intense feelings of sadness that last for more than two weeks, she may have PPD. PPD is a serious medical condition that needs treatment to get better. Signs of postpartum depression include:

- Strong feelings of shame, guilt, worthlessness or failure
- Severe mood swings
- Changes in how much she eats or sleeps
- Feeling tired all the time
- In severe cases, thinking about hurting herself or the baby

As a dad you play an important role in supporting your partner and may be able to notice PPD symptoms before she does. Talk to your partner and the NICU staff if you think your partner may have PPD.

How can I be active in my baby's care?

You play an important role in your baby's care. Here are some ways you can be involved:

- **Ask questions.** You can ask questions when the health care provider (also called provider) sees your baby or when you call the NICU to check on your baby.
- **Hold your baby.** Talk to your baby's provider about when you can hold your baby. You can hold your baby even if he's connected to medical equipment.
- **Be an active member of your baby's health care team.** Make decisions about your baby's care with your partner and your baby's providers.
- **Care for your baby.** When your baby is ready, you can bathe, feed, change and hold him. You may feel nervous at first, but your baby's providers can show you what to do.

How do I decide to spend my time?

You may be overwhelmed with everything that needs to be done. You can't be everywhere at once. Planning out your days can be helpful. Decide what's most important and let others help with the rest so you can spend more time with those who need you most.

- **Spend time with your other children.** If you have other children at home, try to spend special time with them and reassure them that you love them. They're probably worried about mom and the baby, too.
- **Ask for and accept help.** Many family members and friends want to help but aren't sure what to do. Friends and family can help with things like cooking meals, cleaning the house, mowing the lawn, going grocery shopping, taking children to school and walking the dog.
- **Get help with sharing information about your baby.** Ask a trusted family member or friend to pass on information you and your partner have agreed to share about your baby.
- **Talk with your boss.** Tell him about your baby's condition, in case you need to leave work unexpectedly or need to take calls from his medical team.

How can I take care of myself?

Nobody expects you to be a superhero. Take care of yourself so you can support your family. Here's what you can do:

- **Get plenty of sleep and eat healthy foods.** Try to get to bed earlier at night. Limit sweet and salty snacks.
- **Take a break.** Try to fit in activities that help you relieve stress, such as exercise, sports, hobbies, going to the movies or playing with your other children. Taking a break can help you cope and be better able to help your family.
- **Find support.** Attend a NICU parent support group. Visit shareyourstory.org, the March of Dimes online community for NICU families. On the site you can talk with other dads who have had a baby in the NICU. No one understands what you are going through better than other dads who have been there.

Things to remember:

- Expect strong emotions. You, your partner and your family may feel differently at times.
- Do what you can to support your partner.
- You play an important role in your baby's life. You are a member of the NICU team that is working to make your baby stronger.
- Ask for and accept help.
- Take care of yourself so that you can take care of your family.

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