

NICU 101 — what you need to know

Being with your baby

Almost all NICUs have visiting guidelines about who can be with your baby and when. These guidelines let you know:

- Who can be with your baby
- How many family members and friends can be with your baby at one time
- If children can be in the NICU
- When people who are not family members can be with your baby

Family members and friends need to be healthy when they come to see your baby. Anyone, including a parent, who has a runny nose, cough or fever should stay home until they feel better. Some NICUs may allow parents to be in the NICU when they're sick, as long as they wear a mask.

“As hard as it was on us as parents, it seemed to take a bigger toll on our son. He was just 2 years old and wasn’t allowed in the NICU because it was flu season. For the 2 months Eva was in the hospital, Simon cried every day, asking to see “baby sister.” Once Eva came home, our son did everything he could to take care of her. He’s a wonderful brother, and they’re very close. I think it’s partly because he spent so much time waiting to meet her.”

ASHLEY

MOM OF A PREMATURE BABY

Preventing infections

NICUs have hand-washing policies. Ask someone to show or tell you the right way to clean your hands before you see your baby. Making sure your hands are clean protects your baby and the other babies in the NICU from serious infections.

Here are the steps many NICUs use for hand washing:

- Take off any jewelry on your hands or wrists.
- Roll up your sleeves so you can clean up to your elbows.
- Wash every part of your hands with soap and warm water, using a rubbing motion. Wash over and between each of your fingers, your palms and the back of your hands. Then wash your wrists and arms up to your elbows.
- Clean under and around your fingernails.
- Wash your hands for at least 30 seconds to remove dirt and germs. This is about the time that it takes to sing the Happy Birthday song two times. Some hospitals will ask you to wash longer.

Sometimes you’ll need to clean your hands after you’re already in the NICU. For example:

- After you sneeze, cough or blow your nose
- Before and after you change your baby’s diaper
- After you touch any area of your body that may have a lot of germs, including your nose, mouth, face or hair
- After you go to the bathroom
- After you touch any electronic devices, including your phone, camera, computer or tablet
- After you touch your purse, jacket or shoes

This resource includes some medical terms you may hear in the NICU. You can find out what they mean in the *Words to know* section at the end of this resource.

Your NICU may require you to use a certain kind of hand sanitizer that is hospital grade. Hospital grade means that it's stronger than regular hand sanitizer. The hospital may ask you to use this kind instead of or in addition to hand washing. When you use hand sanitizer, make sure that you use enough to clean your hands for 15 seconds before it dries.



If you have more than one baby, wash or use hand sanitizer between touching each baby.

Using cell phones

Ask staff if you can use your cell phone in the NICU. Some NICUs allow cell phones. Others have rules for using cell phones, and some NICUs don't allow them at all. If your NICU allows cell phones, keep a few things in mind:

- Clean your phone often with a sanitizing wipe.
- Clean your hands with a hand sanitizer or soap and water after touching your phone.
- Use a quiet voice if you make phone calls in the NICU. Premature and sick babies are very sensitive to sound.
- Put your phone on silent or vibrate. The sound of the phone ringing can startle your baby and may bother other babies, families and staff.

Notes

Words to know

hand sanitizer — A liquid used on hands to kill germs without using water.

infection — An illness caused by some viruses, bacteria or other germs.

NICU — Also called the neonatal or newborn intensive care unit. The place in the hospital where newborns go for special care.

premature birth — When a baby is born before 37 weeks of pregnancy.