

Getting to know your baby

There is so much to learn about your new baby. Spend time with her in the NICU. Watch as she responds to the world around her. Learn when she wants to be touched and when she needs a break. You'll see her needs change as she grows.

Sleep time

When your baby is first born, he may spend a lot of time in light sleep, when you can wake him easily. He may seem sleepy even when he's awake. As he gets older, he'll spend more time in deep sleep, when it's harder to wake him. And he may be more alert when he's awake.

Schedules

Ask the nurse about your baby's schedule, such as when she eats and sleeps, so you know the best times to help take care of her. For example, if your baby is always fed at 3 p.m., this is a good time to be with her. If she sleeps from 4 to 6 p.m., this is a good time for you to rest, too.

Tell your baby's nurse about your schedule. If you want to be there for a feeding or to give your baby a bath, let your nurse know to wait for you. You also can leave notes to tell her when you'll be back in the NICU. Make sure the note includes your baby's name and the date and time you plan to return.

"I knew before having my twin boys that I was going to be a single mother. I had to be both mom and dad. I needed to make sure that every question got asked and that my babies were cared for. I didn't have a partner who could be in the NICU and help me through this experience. I had to rely on my friends and family to help me take care of myself and my sons.

Throughout the NICU stay, I got more confident that I could take care of them. The nurses helped me with schedules before we went home. Those first few months were very hard being a single mom, but I wouldn't change it for anything."

MICHELLE

MOM OF PREMATURE TWINS

Notes

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.

Infant cues

Your baby gives you signals about how she feels and what she needs. These signals are called cues. Some cues tell you that your baby is ready to interact. Other cues let you know that your baby needs a break or needs to rest. To figure out what the cues mean, look at what your baby is doing and what's happening around her. Once you've learned to read your baby's cues, you can better respond to her needs.

When your baby wants to interact

Here are some cues that show your baby is ready to interact. If he:

- Is awake and alert
- Brings his hands or feet together
- Grasps someone's finger or an object
- Puts his hand on his ear or side of his face
- Moves his hand to the area around his mouth
- Moves smoothly
- Opens his eyes wide
- Tries to follow a moving face or object
- Stays in a softly tucked position



Here are some ways to interact with your baby when he's ready:

- Hold him.
- Talk to him, read him a story or sing a song.
- Give him a bath.
- Change his diaper.
- Feed him.

If you have more than one baby, each baby may have different cues and may have their own way they like to be soothed.

Notes



When your baby wants a break

Here are cues that show your baby needs a break. If she:

- Feels stiff or limp
- Stretches out her arms and spreads her fingers wide apart, also called splaying
- Squirms, startles or twitches more than usual
- Makes fists
- Avoids eye contact or turns her head away
- Has pale skin
- Is fussing and crying
- Spits up or chokes
- Pushes her hand out in a stop position
- Arches her back
- Frowns

Here are some things you can do when your baby needs a break:

- Hold her.
- Talk softly to her for a few minutes.
- Place your hand lightly on her tummy or chest.
- Swaddle her snugly, but not too tight, using a blanket.
- Use a containment hold. This is when you gently hold your baby's head and her tummy, bottom or feet. Ask the nurse to show you how.
- If you use a pacifier, give her one to suck on.
- Place a rolled blanket or diaper near her feet so she can press against it.
- Give her your finger to hold.

Sometimes doing these things may be too much for your baby. She may need to be put in her bed in a quiet place with dim lights. If you can't dim the lights, shade your baby's eyes with your hand.



Notes

Your baby's age

If your baby was born early, he has two ages: his chronological age and his adjusted age.

Chronological age: This is the age of your baby from the day of his birth. For example, if your baby was born on May 1 and today is November 1, then your baby's chronological age is 6 months.

Adjusted age: This is the age of your baby based on his due date. For example, your baby was due on July 1 but was born 2 months early on May 1. If today is November 1, then your baby's adjusted

age is 4 months. Health care providers often use your baby's adjusted age to decide if he's growing and developing in a healthy way.

What do you say when someone asks you how old your baby is? That's up to you. You may find that your answer changes based on who's asking. Most people are being kind when they ask about your baby, not nosy. You can say, "He's 6 months old, but he was born 2 months early. That's why he looks like a 4-month-old." Or you can say, "He's 6 months old" or even, "He's 4 months old" and leave it at that. Use the chart below to help you figure out your baby's adjusted age.

What is my baby's adjusted age?			
If your baby's chronological age is 20 weeks, and he was born 6 weeks early, then his adjusted age is 14 weeks or 3 1/2 months.			
Example		Your baby	
Chronological age: <i>(age in weeks from the day your baby was born)</i>	<u>20 weeks</u>		<u> weeks</u>
Weeks born early:	<u>- 6 weeks</u>		<u>- weeks</u>
Adjusted age:	<u>14 weeks</u>		<u> weeks</u>
Age in months:	<u>14 ÷ 4 = 3½ months</u>		<u> ÷ 4 = months</u>

Words to know

adjusted age (uh-JUHS-ted age) — The age of the baby based on his due date. It's the date that health care providers may use to decide if the baby is growing and developing in a healthy way.

chronological age (kron-uh-LOJ-uh-kuhl age) — This is the age of the baby from the day of his birth: the number of days, weeks or years old he is.

containment hold — This is a way to hold a baby. It's done by placing one hand lightly on the baby's head and the other hand on the baby's tummy or cupping her feet gently.

cues — Signals about how a baby feels and what she needs.

health care provider — Also called provider. The person who gives medical care.

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.

swaddle — A safe way to wrap the baby in a blanket. This is when the baby is wrapped in a thin blanket so that it covers most of her body below the neck.