

The Risk of Infection in the NICU

When your baby enters the NICU, they have a greater risk of infection because their immune systems are not yet well developed. Infection prevention is critical to their health.

“Prevention of infection is very important for the NICU. Premature babies particularly are very vulnerable to infections.”

“The sicker a baby is the more at risk that baby is for infection. Certainly, if a baby has tubes, breathing tubes, tubes to deliver fluid or other types of things that enter the body from the outside, these all put the baby at risk for infection.”

“I tell parents when they come in the NICU that they need to be more cognizant of hygiene because what for them would not be a risk at all could place their baby at severe risk. Germs that they encounter in the environment on a normal day-to-day basis that would not cause any harm to an adult or to someone with an in-tact immune system could be deadly to a baby in the NICU. The number way that germs are spread is through direct and indirect contact. Direct contact is where somebody has germs on their hands, and they touch another human being directly. Indirect contact is you touch a germ surface or an object, and then before or without performing hand hygiene you go and you touch one of the vulnerable babies, and then you can pass the germs to the baby in that method.”

The best way to prevent the spread of germs in the NICU is to follow the hand hygiene practices required in your baby's NICU. All NICUs have antibacterial soaps and lotions available for your use, and many will require that you start your visit by scrubbing your hands. Others may only require the use of alcohol foam.

“I'm going to show you how we wash our hands as we come on shift. And it's very important that all the parents and visitors that come into the NICU wash their hands. So, we use a disinfectant soap, we're going to use the soap, but also friction. Because that's what helps release all the bacteria that you have on your hands. You're going to rinse well and dry well, because wet hands can transmit bacteria also. And you are going to discard in the trashcan without touching the trashcan. Then we use some antibacterial lotion. We rub that on and let that dry. Now you're going to do this when you first come in, but then every time you touch an electronic, you touch anything around your baby, we have disinfectant foam that you can use in between. You're going to again, rub that on, leave it on, let it dry before you touch your baby.”

The nurses and doctors in the NICU are very vigilant when it comes to infection control. They will often wear gloves, and sometimes even sterile gloves, if the situation demands it when performing a procedure.

“Many of the infants in the NICU have to have an IV that's an intravenous tube for medication or blood is given directly into the vein. Well that's a break in the skin. That's another place for germs to enter. So, we also work very hard to make sure that the nursing staff remembers to wash their hands before they touch that IV tubing, to clean it with alcohol, because that's just another opportunity for an infection to take place.”

Each NICU sets its own visitation policy, so be sure to familiarize yourself with what your NICU allows.

“We know that visitation is very important for the wellbeing of the family, as well as for the infant. But we also know that we need to protect the infant from infection.”

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"We ask the parents to be cognizant of the signs and symptoms of infection and to make sure that everyone who's coming in to visit is well and doesn't have any symptoms, so that nothing can be transmitted to the baby."