

Leaving the NICU Checklist

The time for your baby to be discharged from the NICU will be here before you know it. You should start planning for that day as soon as your baby is admitted. Your NICU nurse will carefully go over all the things you need to know before your baby leaves the hospital. Here is a brief checklist of some of the things she'll cover.

Before babies can be discharged, they will be required to do a variety of things: They should be able to stay in an open crib with baby's temperature in normal range. They must breathe normally with no concerning episodes of apnea or bradycardia. And they should be able to take all feedings by mouth for 24 to 48 hours and show that they can gain weight consistently. Premature babies usually meet these criteria somewhere between 36 to 40 weeks or near their due date.

There are a number of tests your baby must complete before going home: A hearing screening. And for some babies, an eye exam. But only if baby was less than 31 weeks or 1500 grams at birth.

Before they are released from the hospital, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a car seat safety test for all babies born earlier than 37 weeks gestation. After NICU staff check that the baby's car seat is the correct size, he will sit in it for at least 90 minutes, while oxygen saturation levels are checked to establish that they remain in the normal range. This will help ensure a safe journey home.

In addition, one of the NICU nurses might provide you with specific car seat safety instructions. This will include: The appropriate car seat selection. How to put the baby in the car seat properly. And where and how to keep the seat secured to the car. There are many resources available to help you keep your baby safe in a car seat. Ask your hospital staff which ones are the best for you.

Preparing yourself for life with baby before he comes home will help the whole family make the transition. Set up the crib and get the baby supplies you'll need. Make a list of all the baby's doctors and any emergency numbers you may need. Take advantage of any of the NICU baby care classes that are available. Schedule all follow up appointments and well-baby visits. And look into home caregiver services, or other medical help services that might be available.

There are a host of other considerations you need to be aware of upon baby's discharge. They include information about: Immunizations; Taking medication; Reviewing any medical equipment that might be necessary; Creating a safe sleeping environment; And learning about Shaken Baby Syndrome and why babies cry.

It can be mentally and emotionally tough when you finally arrive home with your baby after discharge. There are real adjustments to life outside the NICU without all the helpful NICU staff. So, prepare yourself for being alone with baby. Seek help and support from family, friends, or other caregiver professionals if you think you need it.

Soon your baby will be on his way home and you will leave the NICU knowing that he was well cared for. Now it will be your turn to give your baby all the love and support he'll need to grow up healthy and strong.