

# Caring for Your Preemie

The Kuntz family in Rockford, Illinois, is eagerly awaiting the arrival home of their newest member, baby Angelo. But unlike his older brother and sisters Angelo's pregnancy was anything but normal. A normal pregnancy lasts 40 weeks. Babies born much earlier than that are considered premature.

*"We say anything 36 or below is premature."*

*"He was born thirteen weeks early."*

Little Angelo Kuntz weighed two pounds, nine ounces at birth and measured 16 inches long. He was in a fight for his life from the beginning. He immediately went to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, the NICU.

*"Babies come to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit for a variety of problems. About half come because they're premature and the other half are babies who are not premature but have conditions such as difficulty breathing or surgical conditions that need to be repaired in the first hours or weeks of life."*

Making the transition from living in the womb to living in the world is especially difficult for premature babies, "Preemies" as they're called because their organs are not yet fully developed. Thanks to medical advances, children born after 28 weeks of pregnancy, weighing more than two pounds and three ounces, have almost a full chance of survival. Preterm babies born before 28 weeks may have more complications and require intensive treatment and support in the NICU.

Babies in the NICU may need help staying warm, breathing, eating or many other types of assistance that require the use of specialized equipment. Every person working in the NICU has specific training in caring for the tiniest of newborns. Each piece of equipment has been designed to support the needs of these fragile infants.

*"We monitor their vital signs continuously because babies are so unpredictable about what they're going to do. We watch their heart rates, we watch their breathing, we watch their temperature and we watch the oxygen levels in their blood with a little pulse oxymeter around the clock."*

Breathing difficulties are among the most common reasons for infants to stay in the NICU. Babies may need the assistance of a ventilator or a machine called a CPAP, which stands for continuous positive airway pressure, to help them breathe. At times, parents may feel a little overwhelmed at the number of machines and noises the equipment makes, but they're all necessary to help the babies get better.

*"We actually felt very lucky and very blessed to be surrounded by science, technology and family at that crisis."*

Protecting premature infants against infection in the NICU is critical. Even a little sniffle for an adult can mean a big problem for a baby in the NICU. Anyone who enters the NICU must do a thorough hand washing and sanitizing before they are allowed to be near the babies. Visitation from parents and other appropriate family members is one of the best ways to help bond with a baby in the NICU. Danyel Harber makes visiting baby Izzy part of her daily routine. She was born at 25 weeks and is getting stronger every day.

*"The first thing I do in the morning is I come in and put my stuff down and just immediately start talking to her. I do believe that she can hear me. I believe she knows who I am and knows that whether I'm here or not."*

# Caring for Your Preemie

If a baby is stable enough, doctors may even encourage something called “Kangaroo Care,” where mothers and fathers will hold a baby under their clothes for skin-to-skin contact to warm and sooth the infant.

*“Skin to skin contact is very positive. The babies are able to maintain their temperature and often they relax and then can feel the heat of the mother, the skin of the mother, and the scent of the mother. All those things are very important.”*

One other way to help babies in the NICU is for mothers to breast feed. Hospitals often supply mothers with the necessary containers and labeling information for them to pump milk at home to bring to the NICU.

*“Breast milk is the best source of nutrition for premature babies and newborns because it provides the nutritional elements for adequate growth and development. Furthermore, breast milk contains antibodies and some other elements that help babies to fight infection.”*

*“I know that it’s very good for her, that all the antibodies and the good bacteria and you know they talk about even just the first few days what your breast milk can provide for your baby and if I’m able to do it, I’m willing to, if my milk comes in then I’m going to.”*

*“If the baby’s intestines seem ready for food but the baby is not coordinated, we would put in a little feeding tube, it looks like a piece of spaghetti with a hollow core, it’s very soft very flexible. We’ll put it either in the baby’s mouth or the baby’s nose.”*

Exactly when a baby gets to go home from the NICU depends on many factors.

*“Babies stay in the intensive care unit until they are physiologically stable to go home. I tell the families I’m going to keep the baby in the intensive care unit until the baby can stay warm without an isolette, eat everything by mouth without tubes and without IVs, and breathe all the time without help.”*

After many weeks of watching and waiting Baby Angelo is finally home. His family is thrilled! And Connie has this advice to share with other parents.

*“Trust your doctors, trust your nurses, trust the respiratory therapists, trust the housekeeping staff at the hospital, just trust. This is something that’s bigger than you, that’s bigger than your baby and it’s going to save your family.”*