

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome

When babies are exposed to certain drugs and prescription medicines chronically in the womb, they may need special care and treatment after birth. Babies born with drug dependence go through a process of withdrawal: developing symptoms called Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, or N-A-S. This is also called Neonatal Withdrawal Syndrome.

“NAS symptoms appear often in the first several days of life if a baby’s going to withdraw. Those symptoms would be excessive sucking, excessive crying, not sleeping very well, poor feeding which may be vomiting or just not sucking well at all. Diarrhea can be a symptom of NAS. Things like tremors or jitteriness. And irritability to sound and light.”

The baby’s nurse will usually score the baby’s symptoms using a well-known tool, called the Finnegan scale. The doctor will then use this score as well as his or her exam of the baby to evaluate how severe the symptoms are and determine the best treatment plan, which may include medication.

The goal of treatment is to make the baby as comfortable as possible while he goes through withdrawal. If a baby isn’t comfortable on the medication prescribed, the dose will be changed, or another medication added. Once the baby is stable, his medication is reduced every few days depending on symptoms, until he is off of it completely.

Many hospitals also use the “Eat, Sleep, Console” method. This method focuses on three areas: Eat: Is your baby feeding normally? Sleep: Is your baby able to sleep between feedings? Console: Can your baby be consoled or comforted within 10 minutes of crying? This method allows mom and baby to stay together so that their baby can be fed on demand and comforted as much as possible.

Moms, dads, grandparents, and anyone involved in the baby’s care can help by learning specific ways to comfort the baby. While every baby is unique, some of these soothing techniques can help: Calm the baby’s surroundings by dimming the lights and keeping sounds low. Speak softly and keep stimulation to an absolute minimum. Place your hands on the baby’s back and head to “cup” the baby, without rubbing, stroking, or patting the baby.

Skin-to-skin contact is important to newborn babies, but even more so in babies who are going through NAS as this contact helps their nervous system stay calm and more well-regulated. Holding and cuddling a baby against a bare chest provides warmth and comfort. Both mom and dad can do this.

In some instances, mother’s may be encouraged to breastfeed. When possible-speak to your healthcare provider to see if breastfeeding your baby would be beneficial. Swaddling a baby snugly in a thin blanket or sleep sack can also soothe him.

It’s normal for a baby with NAS to spend extra time in the hospital. The length of the hospital stay varies with each baby, but when the baby does go home, he’ll need the same quiet comfortable care he received in the hospital.

Seeing a baby go through NAS symptoms can be difficult but providing gentle comfort and relaxation techniques is the best way you can help in the baby’s treatment and care.