What Parents Need to Know About Leaving the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit

Infants born prematurely or ill spend anywhere from a few hours to many weeks in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs).

Although NICU stays are stressful for parents, the continuous monitoring and excellent bedside care can be reassuring. Leaving the NICU when an infant is able to eat, grow, and develop safely can be both exciting and nerve-racking.

Preparing for Discharge

Ask questions. Understand your infant’s needs to anticipate and avoid problems. Before going home, select a primary care physician (PCP) you like and who is comfortable caring for medically complex infants. Prior to discharge, schedule follow-up appointments and fill any prescriptions or recommended vitamins. Obtain a car seat or possibly a car bed, depending on your infant’s needs.

Special Monitoring

In the NICU, infants have many monitors, yet most do not go home with any. The routine use of home monitors does not increase safety. However, a few do go home with monitors for watching their heart rate, breathing, or oxygen saturation so parents need to be trained and feel confident using them. Most NICUs want parents to spend a night with their infant prior to discharge to improve their confidence in managing at home.

Growth and Development

Infants in the NICU are commonly underweight from prematurity or because it is hard for sick infants to grow. Monitoring their growth with your PCP will be important. Premature infants have special growth charts, and most infants will catch up by age 2 years. Feeding can be challenging, and parents may have to add calories to breast milk or formula. Many NICU graduates have feeding issues such as reflux, difficulties with swallowing, or tire easily. Feeding plans may need tweaking as infants grow. Premature infants are at risk for developmental delays, but it is important to use the infant’s adjusted age for milestones. Children achieve new skills at different ages so monitoring progress is important. Your PCP can help follow your infant’s development and refer to physical, occupational, or speech therapists as needed.

Special Precautions for NICU Graduates

- Infants who were in the NICU need all routine childhood vaccines and may need to catch up once discharged. They may also receive a special treatment to protect them against a cold virus called respiratory syncytial virus. Parents and other family members can make sure they have received all of their vaccines, including tetanus, diphtheria, and pertussis and influenza, and should not allow unvaccinated visitors or those with colds.
- NICU graduates should sleep on their backs in a crib or bassinet without blankets or toys. Parents need sleep too.
- Infants, especially those receiving oxygen, are particularly susceptible to cigarette smoke. If necessary, ask your PCP what cessation programs are available in your community.
- Parent stress from having a NICU graduate can be high. Screening for postpartum depression is important for all mothers, especially if their infant was in the NICU. Ask for help if feeling depressed or overwhelmed.
- Prepare other children for your infant’s discharge. Premature infants have more needs than full-term infants but will be important members of every household.

For More Information

https://www.preemiecare.org/resources_tools.htm
https://www.marchofdimes.org/complications/home-after-the-NICU.aspx

Leaving the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU)

Bringing home an infant who spent time in a NICU can be stressful for parents. Steps taken prior to discharge can help prepare for life at home with a NICU graduate.

Before NICU discharge
- Select a primary care professional (PCP)
- Schedule follow-up appointments
- Fill prescriptions and recommended vitamins
- Obtain a car seat or car bed
- Spend a night with the infant in the NICU to practice managing home monitors

After NICU discharge
- Monitor the infant’s growth and development with your PCP
- Adjust feeding plans as necessary
- Vaccinate per routine childhood vaccine schedule
- Infants should sleep on their backs in a crib without blankets or toys
- Ask for help if feeling depressed or overwhelmed by parental stress

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