

Coping with Stress When You Have a Baby in the NICU

This handout gives tips for coping with stress when you have a baby in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU).

When you have a baby in the NICU, it is natural to be concerned about many things, including your family, finances, and what to expect in the next few months. Other NICU parents have found it helpful to ask for support from loved ones, talk with other NICU parents, find resources as needed, and take the time to rest.

Talk with your healthcare providers when you are feeling stressed. They may have thoughts as to how you can feel less stressed, including:

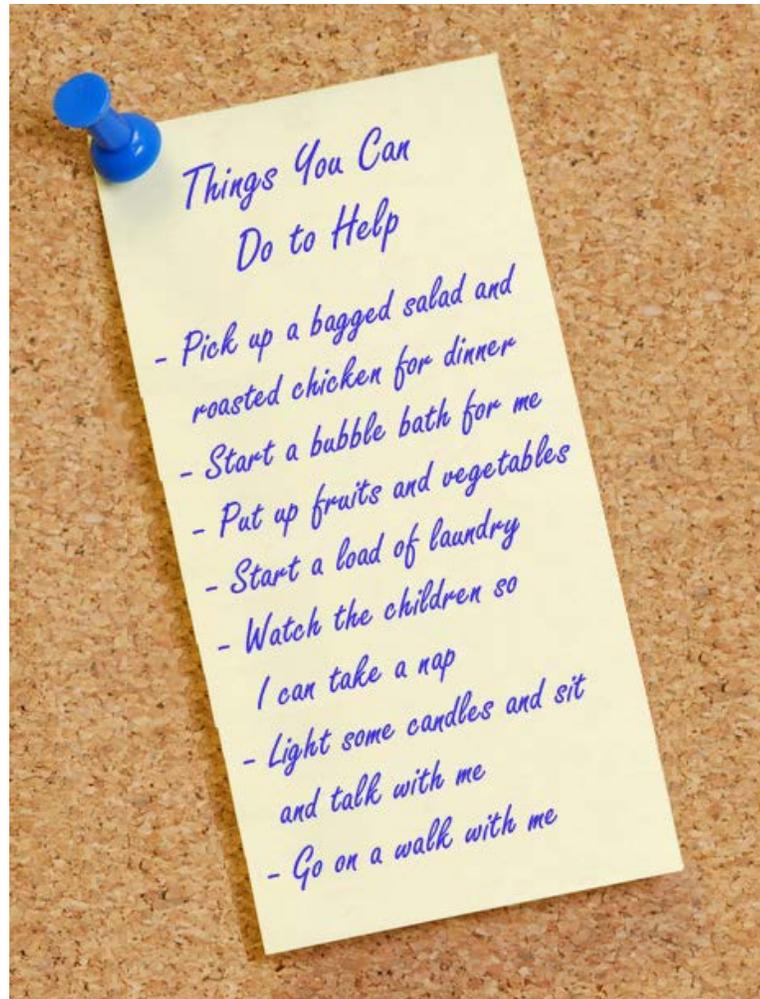
Supporting Yourself

- Do your best, but accept that it is not possible to be perfect.
- Get involved. Learn about support groups for parents of NICU infants in the hospital and in your local community. Talk about your stress and connect with others who have had a similar experience.
- Take a time-out. Do deep breathing exercises, take a bubble bath or soak your feet in warm water, meditate, count to 10, try yoga exercises, or take a walk.
- Talk with a friend. Write your thoughts in a journal. Laugh when you can. Ask your nurse about the journal we have available for parents.
- Eat healthy foods and well-balanced meals. Your body needs to restore all of its reserves. Keep taking a prenatal vitamin or a daily multivitamin with 400 mcg of folic acid.
- Avoid dealing with stress in unhealthy ways. Limit alcohol and caffeine. Avoid smoking and second-hand smoke.



Eat healthy foods. Your body needs good nutrition to deal with stress.

- Accept that you cannot control everything. Try to let go of what you cannot control, and focus on what you can do to make things better. Take 1 day at a time.
- Accept help. Loved ones really want to help out during this challenging time. Do not try to do everything on your own. Talk with friends and family and ask for their help. Then, make a list of things they can do to help and post it on the refrigerator:



Being Active

- Moving your body may help ease your mind. Short daily walks are better than 1 big exercise period once a week, especially if you are feeling anxious or sad.
- Talk with your healthcare provider before you start an exercise program. Most new mothers can follow the same exercise guidelines they followed when they were pregnant, if there were no complications after delivery.

- Walking is safe soon after giving birth. Build up slowly. If you did not exercise before, you may want to begin by walking 1 block and increasing to 2 or 3 blocks the next day. Slowly increase how often and how fast you walk.
- It is a good idea to stretch before you walk. This helps your muscles warm up. Cool down by slowing down at the end of your walk.
- If you had a Cesarean birth, a hard birth, or complications, it may take a little longer to feel ready to start exercising. Also, do not do full sit-ups (crunches) until your doctor says it is OK to do them. Ask about this at your postpartum check-up 6 to 8 weeks after giving birth.

Learning More

You may find these online resources helpful:

American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists:

- “Getting in Shape After Your Baby Is Born”
www.acog.org/~/media/For%20Patients/faq131.ashx?dmc=1&ts=20111221T1621555883
- “Postpartum Depression”
www.acog.org/~/media/For%20Patients/faq091.ashx?dmc=1&ts=20111221T1622337621

Anxiety Disorders Association of America:

- “Tips to Manage Anxiety and Stress”
www.adaa.org/living-with-anxiety/managing-anxiety/tips

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- “Depression Among Women of Childbearing and Reproductive Age”
www.cdc.gov/reproductivehealth/Depression/index.htm

March of Dimes:

- “Postpartum Feelings”
www.marchofdimes.com/pregnancy/postpartum.html

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women’s Health, National Women’s Health Information Center:

- “Stress and Your Health Fact Sheet”
<http://www.womenshealth.gov/publications/our-publications/fact-sheet/stress-your-health.html?from=AtoZ>



Many websites offer support for families affected by premature births.

Websites for Families Affected by Prematurity

March of Dimes

www.marchofdimes.com/baby/premature_NICUexperience.html
(English)

www.nacersano.org/prematuro/9324.asp (Spanish)

Information, articles, and support for families affected by premature birth. It includes how to care for yourself and how to cope if your baby dies. They also have a list of faith-based and secular national resources to support families dealing with the birth of a premature infant.

Mental Health Ministries

www.mentalhealthministries.net

An online faith-based community that offers support and information to those who are dealing with the stigma of mental illness.

Parent Trust for Washington Children

www.parenttrust.org

Parenting classes and support groups in Washington state, including classes just for fathers.

Postpartum Support International

www.postpartum.net

Online support for women who have mood and anxiety disorders related to pregnancy. The website also provides links to local resources and offers phone chats for both women and men.

Share Your Story

www.shareyourstory.org

An online support resource where families can connect and share their experience of having a premature infant. Sponsored by the March of Dimes.

Questions?

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or healthcare provider if you have question or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help.

Neonatal Intensive Care
Unit: 206.598.4606

Resources: *Tips to Manage Anxiety and Stress* by Anxiety Disorders Association of America, and *Getting in Shape After Your Baby Is Born* by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists