

Signs of Breathing Problems

Caring for your infant at home

Before you take your baby home from the hospital, we want you to know what it might look like if your baby starts to have breathing problems (*respiratory distress*). The first step is to know how your baby's normal breathing looks, so that you will notice if there is a problem. Ask your nurse if you have questions about your baby's normal breathing pattern.

Warning Signs

Here are some signs that something may be wrong :

- **Your baby is taking too many breaths.** Ask your baby's nurse how many breaths your baby normally takes in a minute. This number may be different for your baby than for other babies. In general, if your baby is breathing over 70 times a minute, that is too fast.
- **Your baby is working harder than usual to breathe.** You may notice these symptoms:
 - *Retractions:* You can see the muscles in your baby's chest (under the ribs and maybe below the neck) going in and out much more deeply than usual.
 - *Nasal flaring:* Your baby's nostrils flare out while breathing in. This means your baby is working harder to breathe.
 - *Grunting:* You hear a grunting noise at the end of your baby's breath. This could mean your baby is trying to open a blocked airway.
 - *Wheezing:* You hear a whistling sound when your baby breathes out. This may mean there is a blockage in the small airways in your baby's lungs.
 - *Hoarse, barking cough:* This may be a sign of an infection in your baby's windpipe and bronchial tubes (*croup*).



Ask your NICU nurse about your baby's normal breathing pattern.

- *Cyanosis*: The skin looks blue. A grayish-blue color appears around the lips, eyes, under nails.
- *Congestion*: Your baby's chest feels crackly, nose sounds stuffy.
- **Your baby isn't feeding well.** Feeding intolerance and breathing problems often happen together.
- **It is hard to wake your baby up to feed, or your baby's energy level seems to have rapidly declined.** These are symptoms of *lethargy*.
- **Your baby has a fever higher than 100.4°F (38°C).** Lung infections often cause a fever.

What to Do

- **Call 911 right away if your baby is blue or not breathing.**
- If you are think your baby may be in respiratory distress, call your baby's primary care provider (PCP) **right away**. Trust yourself. You know your baby better than anyone.

Before calling your baby's PCP, have this information ready:

- How your baby's breathing is different than usual
- Your baby's temperature
- How your baby is eating

Before Discharge

Before your baby leaves the hospital:

- Talk with your nurse about signs of breathing problems so you will be able to recognize them at home.
- Post your PCP's phone number where you and others can find it quickly.
- Know what number to call after hours and on weekends and holidays.
- Know when to:
 - Call your baby's doctor
 - Go to the emergency room
 - Call 911

Questions?

Your questions are important. Talk with a member of your baby's healthcare team if you have questions or concerns.

Neonatal Intensive Care Unit:
206.598.4606