

KEEPING A Positive Attitude

WHEN MY BABY COMES EARLY

Coping with the unexpectedness of your baby's early arrival can cause many emotions. Some babies will remain in the hospital and need specialized care in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), which can be even more stressful for parents. It is important to understand that it is normal and expected that your emotions may be very strong and swing from one extreme to the other. You may at first feel shock or loss, and then develop fear and anxiety, or anger. You may even blame yourself or feel helpless. Stress about the uncertainty of your baby's condition, or of the future, may feel overwhelming. Know that it is OK to be frustrated; the more that you can maintain a positive outlook, the better prepared you'll be to manage your baby's care. The following tips may help.



Allow yourself to cry — You may be worried that if you give in to your feelings, you'll never be able to recover. Emotionally, it is healthy to release your emotions.

Establish a routine — Find a way to balance work, home life, and visiting the hospital. If your baby is in the NICU, allow yourself to leave your baby's side. Even though your baby needs you, it's important to have time to yourself and for the rest of your family.

Connect with other parents of premature babies — Find support groups and other parents you can talk to. To connect with other parents online, the March of Dimes® has created a community especially for families who have faced the frightening experience of having a baby born early or with a health condition. Visit www.shareyourstory.org. To find a support group specific to your family's needs, you may wish to check out the state-by-state resources listed on www.preemiecare.org.

Keep a journal — Sometimes, writing your feelings down on paper can help you cope and move forward. A journal keeps track of how far you and your baby have come on your journey.

Vent your frustrations — Tell others, including your partner, how you feel. If your baby has a setback, you may become scared and anxious. It's OK to talk about your feelings.

Celebrate when you can — When your baby makes progress, experience the joy with those you love.

Let others help — Family and friends may be willing to help, but aren't sure how to ask. Be specific about how other people can best help you.

Allow yourself to rest and sleep — You will need this in order to fully recover from your delivery and to keep your immune system healthy.

Source: Excerpted from the March of Dimes booklet, "Parent: You & Your Baby in the NICU," written in collaboration with Deborah L. Davis, Ph.D., and Mara Tesler Stein, Psy.D., authors of "Parenting Your Premature Baby and Child: The Emotional Journey."

HOW DOES MY PARTNER FEEL?

The birth of a baby is wonderful, but you and your partner were likely surprised by your baby's early arrival. However, it is possible that the stress of the NICU experience or just having a premature baby will affect your relationship. There may be times when you feel differently about ways to cope and how to care for your baby. Try to understand each other's point of view. Make time to listen, be respectful, and provide mutual support. You will probably be focusing most of your energy on your baby, so remember that it is also important to make time to be together as a couple.



Helping Parents



Navigate The Premature Journey

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HOW DO MY OTHER CHILDREN FEEL?

The birth of a premature baby is difficult and emotional for all family members, including your other children. You may be worried about what they are feeling, especially if you, yourself, are having trouble dealing with the emotional roller coaster ride of having a baby born early. Children can be deeply affected by a full-term baby's arrival, so their feelings can be even stronger when their sibling is born early. Young children may feel upset or threatened by the changes in family routines or by being separated from you. Older ones may be worried about the baby's health. Be sure to spend special time with all of your children. Speak honestly and openly with information suited to your child's age, and make sure they know how their baby brother or sister is doing. Offer support, and include them in visits if your baby is in the NICU so that they can see the baby for themselves.

MANAGING STRESS

It's not unusual for parents to experience stress after the unexpectedness of a baby born early. However, it also is important to keep your mind and body as strong as possible as you prepare for taking care of your baby, so learning to manage stress may be a helpful tool for you to consider.

The following are some tips and suggestions from the American Institute of Stress about how to manage and minimize stress in your life. The more you learn how to manage stress and to maintain a positive attitude, the better prepared you will be to navigate the premature journey.

- Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and tobacco. These substances add stress to your body and increase your heart rate.
- Surround yourself with people that you love, and ask them for help.
- Seek some form of spirituality, if you choose.
- Seek out the information you need as you face new situations. Be active in your baby's care. Ask questions.
- Keep a positive outlook and self-image.
- Keep your mind as active as your body. Find small bits of time for activities that you enjoy like exercise, lunch with friends or going to the movies.
- Learn to remain calm. Try some simple relaxation techniques, like deep breathing, listening to your favorite music or even imagining a dream getaway in your mind.

Source: The American Institute of Stress, <http://www.stress.org/topic-reduction.htm>, 2009.

DO I HAVE POSTPARTUM DEPRESSION?

During the first few weeks after birth about 80% of mothers experience mixed emotions and sometimes mood swings. This short period of time is usually referred to as "postpartum blues." Postpartum depression tends to linger much longer (sometimes weeks or months after the baby is born) and affects 12 – 15% of moms.

It is natural to feel many different emotions after your baby is born early. However, if you experience any of the following feelings and cannot get rid of them, talk to your healthcare provider or hospital social worker. You may be experiencing postpartum depression.

- Sadness
- Tiredness
- Anger
- Loss of hope
- Loss of interest in the things you like
- Inability to cope and feeling stuck
- Lack of feeling joy in other parts of your life
- Trouble with relationships of those people closest to you
- A parent support group is not helping enough



Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health <http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/depression-pregnancy.pdf>, March 2009.

DEPRESSION SHOULD NOT BE LEFT UNTREATED.

Talk to your healthcare provider immediately if you experience any of the following:

- Prolonged emotional numbness or detachment
- Feeling detached from your baby
- Difficulty getting out of bed and starting your day
- Inability to manage your day-to-day responsibilities
- Thoughts of harming yourself or others

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office on Women's Health <http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/depression-pregnancy.pdf>, March 2009.

Postpartum Support International is a nonprofit volunteer organization that can help you find support in your area.

Call the Helpline at 1.800.944.4PPD or visit www.postpartum.net.

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