

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome

This leaflet explains more about Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome and what you can expect when you come to hospital.

If you have any further questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)?

Most substances (including medication, tobacco and alcohol) taken in pregnancy will pass through the placenta and will be absorbed by your baby. If those medications or substances can cause physical dependency in you, your baby may become dependent too. Following delivery, when the umbilical cord has been cut, the supply of drugs to the baby suddenly stops and the baby may show signs of physical withdrawal known as Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). This withdrawal process and effects are similar to those experienced by an adult who suddenly stops taking a drug or medication.

Will my baby stay with me?

Your baby will remain with you on the postnatal ward where a midwife will observe for the signs and symptoms of NAS.

Will my baby need any treatment?

Many babies do not need any treatment for NAS although they may be irritable, feed frequently and only sleep for short periods. Some babies may require more specialised care and medical treatment to help them as they adjust.

These symptoms may include:

A continuous high-pitched cry

Tremors or shaking of your baby's limbs

Excessive wakefulness even after a good feed where your baby will not settle

Irritability and scratching of their faces

Increased muscle tone where your baby's limbs feel very stiff

Convulsions or fits

Jerking of either their arms and legs or both (similar to a fit).

What will happen after birth?

We will always aim to keep you and your baby together on the postnatal ward. Babies are only admitted to the Neonatal Unit (NNU) if they need medication and further monitoring for NAS.

Breastfeeding is encouraged to help with withdrawal symptoms and enable bonding with your baby. The use of some drugs can mean that breastfeeding is not recommended in these circumstances. Your midwife or obstetrician will advise about this.

Most babies do not need treatment for NAS and will be able to go home after a period of observation. Babies are observed for three days but some may need a longer period. Withdrawal symptoms may not be apparent immediately after delivery and may develop over a few days or even weeks. Midwifery and Neonatal staff will always explain and discuss with you any treatment your baby may need.

Midwives on the ward will monitor your baby for any signs of NAS using a withdrawal chart.

What can I do to help my baby?

Most babies do not require medical treatment for NAS, however, remember that each baby is different and the length of the withdrawal process varies.

There are things that you can do which will help your baby to withdraw safely and comfortably.

- Provide a quiet environment with dimmed lighting to reduce the stimulation around your baby. Turning down loud music/TV/voices will help your baby to settle if they are crying, irritable or unable to sleep.
- Cuddle your baby as much as possible with skin-to-skin contact as this will help calm your baby, decrease crying and help with feeding.
- Handle your baby very gently to help reduce irritability and crying. Gentle baby massage and bathing can be soothing. Discourage visitors from picking up your baby once he/she is settled.
- Dress your baby in cool clothing and change frequently if they are sweating. If they are restless and irritable, a cool sheet can be used to swaddle your baby to avoid him/her getting too hot. Slings can also be useful when you are at home.
- Feed your baby regularly - frequent small feeds are usually best. Keep a record of all your baby's feeds. If your baby has problems with sucking or is vomiting, talk to your midwife or neonatal staff who will be able to help you.

- Dummies can also be helpful to settle your baby if he/she is excessively sucking. Talk to your midwife or neonatal staff about introducing a dummy if you are breastfeeding.
- Change your baby regularly. Your baby's bottom may get sore due to loose stools/diarrhoea. More frequent nappy changes may be necessary and nappy creams are helpful to protect your baby's skin.
- If your baby sneezes, they may have a blocked nose. Gently wipe the nose if it is dirty but do not clean with cotton wool buds as this can damage your baby's nose.
- Everyone must avoid smoking cigarettes or illicit drugs around your baby and you must keep your baby out of smoky areas. Make sure that your home, car and other places where your baby spends time are smoke free.
- Do not share a bed with your baby and follow the Safer Sleep guidelines.

If your baby appears pale, blue or grey in colour, has breathing difficulties or appears to be panting, has a fit/convulsion or is floppy or stops breathing dial 999 immediately and ask for medical help.

What do I need to do after I go home?

Some babies can still experience withdrawal after they have been discharged from hospital. You can contact your midwife, health visitor or GP if you have any concerns.

Never give your baby any drugs or medication that have not been specifically prescribed for your baby by your GP or the hospital.

Will I have a follow-up appointment?

If your baby requires any medication for their withdrawal symptoms, they will be offered a Neonatal follow up appointment, eight weeks after discharge.

Contact us

If you have any questions or concerns about Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome, please contact your midwife in hospital or community midwife if after discharge.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments, and services offered at our hospitals, please visit www.stgeorges.nhs.uk

Additional services

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS can offer you on-the-spot advice and information when you have comments or concerns about our services or the care you have received. You can visit the PALS office between 9.30am and 4.30pm, Monday to Friday in the main corridor between Grosvenor and Lanesborough wings (near the lift foyer).

Tel: 020 8725 2453 **Email:** pals@stgeorges.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

NHS Choices provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make decisions about your health.

Web: www.nhs.uk

NHS 111

You can call 111 when you need medical help fast but it's not a 999 emergency. NHS 111 is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Calls are free from landlines and mobile phones.

Tel: 111

AccessAble

You can download accessibility guides for all our services by searching 'St George's Hospital' on the AccessAble website (www.accessable.co.uk). The guides are designed to ensure everyone – including those with accessibility needs – can access our hospital and community sites with confidence.



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