

# Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome: A Guide for Families

---

Caring for your new baby during withdrawal



# Congratulations on the birth of your new baby!

This is a happy time for you, but all parents face challenges in their baby's first year.

Some babies need extra loving, including those born with neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS) which is similar to medicine or drug withdrawal in adults. It happens when the baby is born and is suddenly cut off from the medicines or drugs in the mother's body. Within one to five days, the baby may start to show signs that something is wrong.

It's hard to know which babies will have NAS. Some babies will have it even though their mothers only took small doses of medicines for a brief time during pregnancy. Others may show signs because their mothers took large amounts of drugs for a long time while pregnant. Even babies whose mothers took their medicine exactly as prescribed by their health care provider may have NAS. No matter the reason, this guide will help you learn about NAS and how to help your baby be healthy.



## Contents

### What is Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)?

- When will my baby show signs of NAS? . . . . . 2
- What will happen if my baby is in withdrawal? . . . . . 2
- What are the signs of NAS? . . . . . 2

### Treatment for babies with NAS — love, hugs and care

- How can I help my baby? . . . . . 3
- Does my baby need medicine? . . . . . 3
- What happens if my baby needs medicine? . . . . . 4
- How long will my baby need treatment? . . . . . 4
- When can my baby leave the hospital? . . . . . 4

### What to expect when your baby leaves the hospital

- Asking questions helps you help your baby . . . . . 5
- When baby comes home, the journey continues . . . . . 5

### Ways to support and care for your baby

- Tips for caring for babies  
going through withdrawal . . . . . 7

- Key contacts. . . . . 8

- Notes . . . . . 9





# What is neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)?

## When will my baby show signs of NAS?

Most babies show signs of withdrawal, or NAS, between one and five days after birth. The time it takes for signs to show can depend on:

- What kind of medicine or drug the mother took during pregnancy
- How much of the medicine or drug the mother took
- How long the drug was taken
- If the mother used other kinds of substances as well, like alcohol, tobacco, medicines or drugs

**It is very important to tell your nurse and your baby's health care providers about all medicines and drugs used during your pregnancy.** This will help them treat your baby.

## What will happen if my baby is in withdrawal?

Soon after your baby's birth, nurses will check for certain signs. The nurse will give your baby a "score" depending on which NAS signs are present. Your baby will be scored every few hours until he or she is ready to go home. The scoring helps health care providers decide what kind of treatment your baby needs to get better. The nurses will explain the scoring to you. If something is not clear, please ask for more information until your questions are answered.

## What are the signs of NAS?

- High-pitched cries or crankiness
- Stiff arms, legs, and back
- Trouble sleeping
- Shaking, jitters, or lots of sucking
- Not eating well or problems sucking
- Vomiting due to overeating or crankiness
- Fast breathing and/or stuffy nose
- Sneezing or yawning a lot
- Irritation on diaper area due to loose, watery stools
- Irritation on face, back of head, arms, and/or legs due to restlessness
- Poor weight gain after a few days of life

While rare, NAS can also lead to seizures (also called convulsions). They are hard to spot and can last seconds or minutes. Your baby may suddenly start jerking his or her arms and legs or may go stiff. You may also see eye rolling, staring, lip smacking, sucking, or a change in skin color.



# Treatment for babies with NAS — love, hugs and care

## If your baby is showing signs of withdrawal, loving and caring is some of the best medicine.

The combination of loving, hugging, holding your baby close and, in some cases, medicine can help your baby.

## How can I help my baby?

Whether or not your baby needs medicine, you can help your baby by:

- Staying close to your baby
- Continually holding and swaddling your baby
- Making skin-to-skin contact with your baby
- Gently rocking your baby
- Learning infant massage
- Playing soft music
- Feeding your baby whenever he or she looks hungry
- Keeping things quiet and calm around your baby (few visitors, no noise, no bright lights)
- Breastfeeding (when approved by your baby's health care provider)



Your nurse can help you learn how to swaddle your baby if you want to practice or do not know how. If you have any questions at all, please ask before you take your baby home.

## Does my baby need medicine to get better?

Sometimes love, hugs, and care are not enough to help your baby get better. If your baby has many strong signs of withdrawal, your health care provider may also prescribe medicine to help. The medicines that babies with NAS are given most often are morphine and methadone. Sometimes other medicines are added to help your baby during this time. Your health care provider can explain your baby's medicine in more detail.





# What to expect when your baby leaves the hospital

## What happens if my baby is given medicine for NAS?

- Medicines like morphine or methadone will help your baby be calm and comfortable.
- Medicines will reduce your baby's risk of having seizures.
- As your baby starts to get better, the dose of medicine slowly will be lowered and then stopped.

## How long will my baby need treatment?

It is hard to know how long NAS will last. It can last from one week up to many weeks. The length of withdrawal depends on the medicines or drugs — and the amounts — your baby was exposed to during pregnancy. Spending time holding, feeding, and learning to soothe your baby may help to make withdrawal time shorter. It will also help prepare you to care for your baby at home.



## When can my baby leave the hospital?

Babies who do not need medicine to control NAS may stay in the hospital for up to a week. Many babies who need medicine for NAS stay in the hospital up to three to four weeks and rarely some may stay longer. It all depends on how your baby responds to treatment.

The more time you are able to spend with your baby holding, feeding, and learning to care for his or her extra needs, the sooner your baby may be ready to go home and the more ready you will be to care for him or her at home.

During your baby's hospital stay, the NAS signs will lessen. Your baby will be discharged when there is little risk for serious problems.

## If advised by your health care provider: breastfeeding may help your baby

It is generally safe to breastfeed if you're in a stable treatment program, even if you're taking medicine given to you by a health care provider and even if the medicine is for drug withdrawal. Breastfeeding is not safe for substance using mothers who are not in a treatment program or who are using alcohol or illegal drugs. Talk to your health care provider about breastfeeding and the medicines you may be taking. Ask your provider about treatment options for opiate addiction.

## Parent and family support can make a big difference in how fast a baby with NAS gets better.

Babies can continue to have mild symptoms of withdrawal for up to six months after leaving the hospital.

### Once at home, your baby may still have the following:

- Problems feeding
- Slow weight gain
- Crankiness
- Sleep problems
- Sneezing, stuffy nose and trouble breathing



Your baby's health care provider will teach you ways to take care of your baby. They also will show you how you can help your baby if he or she is having any of the problems above. Practice caring for your baby while you are in the hospital so you are more comfortable at home.

## Asking questions helps you help your baby

If you have any questions or concerns about your baby when you are at home or if something just does not seem right, talk to your baby's health care provider. It is important to feel comfortable taking care of your baby. Asking questions — any questions — helps you help your baby.

## When baby comes home, the journey continues

**Remember, babies cry a lot and babies with NAS tend to cry more often and easily.** Helping yourself and managing your stress will help you care for your baby.

- Settle into a quiet, low-lit room to feed your baby.
- Gently rock or sway your baby to calm him or her. (Don't walk or sway your baby while feeding.)
- Remember to put your baby to sleep safely, on his or her back, in a crib with no soft surfaces. It is not safe to sleep in the same bed with your baby.
- If you feel upset, walk away and take deep breaths for a few minutes.
- Never shake your baby or put anything over your baby's face to quiet your baby. This can cause serious harm.
- Call a family member, friend, or your baby's health care provider if you feel upset, angry, scared or just need help. Everyone needs help sometimes.





# Ways to support and care for your baby

Parents and caregivers of a baby with NAS can help the baby get better.



## Here are some things you can do:

Make your baby comfortable by setting up a routine, letting few people visit, talking softly and keeping the room quiet and dim. Turn off the TV or radio, turn your phone down or off and turn down the lights.

Let your baby sleep as long as needed and without being woken up suddenly.

Make feeding time quiet and calm and burp your baby often.

Learn to spot your baby's "I am upset" signs, whether yawning, sneezing, shaking, crying or frowning. Also know the signs that your baby is happy, hungry or relaxed.

When your baby is upset, stop what you are doing, hold your baby skin-to-skin or gently swaddle him or her in a blanket on your chest.

Gently and slowly introduce new things to your baby one at a time. Let your baby calm down before trying anything new, or gently sway or rock your baby.

You also can use infant massage or other things you learned in the hospital to calm your baby. Each baby is different. Use what works best for your baby.

As your baby becomes calmer for longer periods of time, start checking to see if he or she might like to have the blanket wrapped more loosely or taken off sometimes.

Make sure you take your baby to all health care provider appointments once you are home. This will help make sure your baby's growth and learning stay on track. Your provider may recommend an Early Intervention or other follow up program. These programs can help you learn about infant development, and show you the best ways to play with your baby to make sure everything is going well.



## Tips for caring for babies going through withdrawal

- Loving your baby and learning to spot your baby's needs goes a long way.
- Take care of yourself so you can be there when your baby really needs you. Take breaks and ask others for help sometimes.
- Follow all of the health care provider's directions for taking care of your baby and yourself.
- If you are in a drug treatment program, stay as long as your health care provider says. If your provider says you need to be in one, go.
- Keep things calm and quiet around your baby.
- Swaddle, gently rock or sway, or use skin-to-skin contact with your baby.
- Talk to your baby softly and gently.



# Key Contacts

Taking care of your baby also means taking care of yourself, from following your health care provider's orders to keeping up your treatment plan.

Please remember, we are here to help you and your family!

Whenever you have health questions, you can reach a nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week at our 24/7 NurseLine at

**1-855-690-7800 (TTY 711).**



**My health care provider's name and contact information:**

---

---

---

---

---

**My nurse's name and contact information:**

---

---

---

---

---

**Other contacts:**

---

---

---

---

---

# Notes

You can use the space below to write down what works best when you are caring for your baby. Babies tell you how they are feeling by using their bodies and voices to communicate all the time.

**How do I know when my baby is unhappy?**

---

---

---

---

---

**What seems to relax my baby?**

---

---

---

---

---

**How do I know when my baby is happy?**

---

---

---

---

---

**How else can I help my baby?**

---

---

---

---

---

**You play an important role in helping your baby get better.**



Helping your baby stay calm and comfortable is some of the best medicine you can provide. If you have any questions, ask your health care provider. If it's after hours or you aren't sure who to call, **you can reach a registered nurse 24 hours a day, seven days a week at our 24/7 NurseLine at**

**1-855-690-7800 (TTY 711).**



**Member Services:** 1-855-690-7800 (TTY 711)  
**24/7 NurseLine:** 1-855-690-7800 (TTY 711)  
**[www.anthem.com/wimedicaid](http://www.anthem.com/wimedicaid)**



Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield is the trade name of Compcare Health Services Insurance Corporation, an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. ANTHEM is a registered trademark of Anthem Insurance Companies, Inc. The Blue Cross and Blue Shield names and symbols are registered marks of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association.

---

*English* For help to translate or understand this at no cost, please call  
**1-855-690-7800 (TTY 711).**

*Spanish* Si necesita ayuda para traducir o entender esto sin costo, llame al  
**1-855-690-7800 (TTY 711).**

*Russian* Если вам не все понятно в этом документе или нужен перевод,  
звоните по номеру **1-855-690-7800** совершенно бесплатно.

*Hmong* Xav tau kev pab txhais lus lossis xav kom nkag siab cov ntaub ntawv  
no yam tsis tau them nqi, thov hu **1-855-690-7800.**

---

This work is a derivative of *Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome: A Guide for Families* by the Ohio Perinatal Quality Collaborative. This content is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License.