Caring for a Baby with Drug Withdrawal

When a baby is exposed to drugs of abuse taken by a pregnant mother, there may be signs of withdrawal. Your doctor or nurse may talk about Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). This is the medical term for drug withdrawal in babies.

The first signs of withdrawal can occur anytime from birth to two weeks of age. Most babies show signs in the first 48 to 72 hours after birth, but signs may last for weeks or months.

Many things will affect withdrawal signs in your baby, such as:

- The type of drug used.
- The amount of the drug used.
- When the drug was last taken. The closer to delivery the drug is taken, the more severe the signs may be.

Testing and Signs

Your doctor or nurse will check for signs of withdrawal. They will assess your baby’s signs of withdrawal using a tool called a Finnegan NAS scale. They will assign a number which helps determine treatment for your baby. Ask the nurse about your baby’s Finnegan Score.

Your baby’s urine or stool may be checked. The goal is to give your baby treatment and keep him or her comfortable. Medicines or other comfort care methods may be used while in the hospital. Some of these methods can also be used at home.
Many babies with NAS can be fussy and easily upset. It is important to learn your own baby’s behavior cues. **There are many signs of withdrawal, and babies can have one or more signs:**

- Diarrhea and/or diaper rash
- Poor feeding
- Runny nose or congestion
- Temperature changes (too hot or too cold)
- Low birth weight or small size
- Breathing problems
- Seizure or tremors

**Premature babies may also have more signs that show distress in the baby’s nervous system:**

- Hyperactivity
- High pitched cry
- Irritability
- Hiccupping or yawning
- Constant or frequent crying
- Inability to rest and sleep
- Stiffness in arms and legs or muscle twitches
- Constant need to suck or problems with sucking and poor feeding
- Problems regulating body temperature such as feeling too hot or too cold

**These handouts may also be helpful when giving comfort to your baby**

- Comfort Care for a Baby with Drug Withdrawal
- Tips for Soothing Crying Babies
- Coping with Your Baby’s Crying