Drug withdrawal in babies

When a baby is exposed to drugs 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:

- Type of drug used.
- 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

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 your baby’s doctor or nurse about your baby’s Finnegan Score.

Your baby’s urine or stool may also be checked. The goal is to give your baby the right 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.

Signs

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

This handout may also be helpful to you: [Comfort Care for a Baby with Drug Withdrawal](https://patienteducation.osumc.edu).