York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Caring for a baby with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome

Information for patients, relatives and carers

ⓘ For more information, please contact maternity services:

Scarborough Hospital
Woodlands Drive, Scarborough, YO12 6QL
Telephone: 01723 236869

York Hospital
Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE
Telephone: 01904 726869

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This leaflet provides you with information and advice that will help you prepare for the arrival of your baby. Hopefully after reading this, you will feel reassured and confident that your baby can be well cared for and that you can do a lot to help.

If there is anything in this leaflet that you do not understand or would like to talk about further, please speak with your midwife or other health care professional involved in your care.

What is Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome?

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) is the name given to a group of symptoms that a baby may have if their mother has taken medications or drugs during pregnancy and the baby is going through a drug withdrawal after birth.

Baby withdrawal signs and symptoms, including things like:

- High-pitched crying or crying a lot.
- Irritability and restlessness.
- Tremor or shakiness.
- Feeding difficulties, such as being very hungry and excessive feeding as well as poor feeding.
- Sleeping difficulties, (the baby cannot settle or sleep after a feed).
- Large weight loss from birth or poor weight gain.
- Fast breathing.
- Sneezing, stuffy nose, hiccoughs and yawning.
- Vomiting and or diarrhoea.
- High or unstable temperature.
- Nappy rash.
- Occasionally, babies have fits, but this is very rare.

These symptoms can be less in premature babies as they have not had as long exposure to the medication/drugs.

These symptoms can start as soon as 24 hours after birth or sometimes as late as 10 days after birth. They will vary for each baby. There are other things which may contribute to the type of symptoms such as the type of drug used and the dose, the timing of the last dose, how long they have been taken for.

What Causes It?

During pregnancy nearly every drug and/or medicine will pass to the unborn baby through the placenta. These medications can affect the baby, and it can become dependent on this. When the drug or medication is no longer available, the baby may have withdrawal symptoms.

Will I get help caring for my baby?

In the postnatal ward you will be encouraged to breastfeed and bond with your baby. The midwife will use a score chart to assess the condition of your baby. You will be shown how to use the chart so you can help the midwives with this. Most babies are well enough to go home where they can be cared for by their parents, with the help and support of the midwife, health visitor and GP.

The baby needs to be feeding well and not have lost too much weight. Parents are encouraged to keep a close eye on their baby and look for possible signs of withdrawal.

If the baby has severe withdrawal symptoms or other medical problems, they would be admitted to the neonatal unit of the Special Care Baby Unit (SCBU). Here they can get tube feeds and calming medicine if necessary. Treatment aims to reduce the baby's distress and to get the baby feeding and sleeping as normally as possible. Babies usually stay in the neonatal unit for between eight to 14 days, but occasionally for much longer.

Most admissions to the neonatal unit happen when the baby is still in hospital, but babies are also admitted to the paediatric ward from home if problems become worse later on. If the baby's problems get worse at home then it is better to admit the baby earlier rather than later. This is why we offer parents extra help at home to see how the baby is doing and support parents in recognising any symptoms early.

Babies with withdrawal symptoms may be difficult to look after. They can require a lot of patience and may be difficult to feed and settle. Some babies can be irritable for months, but symptoms gradually improve with time.

Things parents and family can do to help:

You will have been given this leaflet because your baby may be at risk of developing withdrawal symptoms. Experience has shown us that there are many things that you can do to help calm and comfort your baby. Here are some suggestions:

- Make sure your baby is kept in very quiet and calm surroundings, no bright lights or loud sounds that might upset your baby.
- Make sure no one smokes near your baby, keep the air fresh but warm.
- Hold your baby as much as you can, the baby will cry less and feed better if they have skin-to-skin contact.
- Offer a dummy when the baby is not hungry.
- Move and handle your baby very gently; try giving them a gentle massage.
- Change your baby's clothes frequently, especially if they sweat a lot.
- Avoid getting your baby too hot – hats should not be worn inside and you can find more information on safe temperature from the lullaby trust: https://www.lullabytrust.org.uk/ur/baby-safety/safer-sleep-information/room-temperature/.
- Regularly check and change your baby's nappy.

- Use a barrier cream around the baby's bottom area to help prevent any skin damage.
- Feed your baby on demand, frequent small feeds are normally better.
- Keep a record of all the feeds your baby takes so that the midwife or health visitor can check whether your baby is feeding enough and putting on enough weight.
- If your baby has a convulsion (fit), dial 999 straight away and ask for an ambulance.

Breastfeeding and drug use

All mothers are encouraged to breastfeed their babies and are given help to do so, including mothers who are taking medication and drugs. Breastfeeding can sometimes help reduce your baby's withdrawal symptoms.

Breastfeeding is best done before taking any medication and should be avoided for one to two hours after any dose has been taken. Medications are best taken as a single dose where possible and should be administered before the baby's longest sleep period.
Only very small amounts of medications or drugs are passed to the baby through breast milk. The benefits of breastfeeding are so great that they outweigh the risks of continued medication/drug use.

References:

Sheffield Teaching Hospitals (2023) Caring for a Baby with Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome – Information for parents and carers

Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust (2018) Babies at Risk of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) – Advice for Parents and Carers.

Whittaker A (2014) Service User and Service Provider Accounts of Managing the Risks and Realities of Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome: an exploratory study in Lothian.

Where can I get more help and advice?

Drug and Alcohol Service – Change Grow Live (York)

01904 46 46 80

Email: yorksms.info@cgl.org.uk
Website: http://www.changegrowlive.org

North Yorkshire Horizons (Scarborough):

01723 33 07 30
Email: info@nyhorizons.org.uk
Website: http://www.nyhorizons.org.uk/

East Riding Partnership (Bridlington)
01262 45 82 00

Email hnf-tr.erbridlington@nhs.net
Website: http://www.humber.nhs.uk/services/drug-and-alcohol-services-east-riding-partnership

Frank:
0300 123 66 00
www.talktofrank.com
A free and confidential 24 hour helpline about drugs

Narcotics Anonymous:
0300 999 12 12

Website: http://ukna.org/

Regular meetings take place in York and throughout North Yorkshire.

York Carers Centre
Website: http://www.yorkcarerscentre.co.uk/

Tell us what you think of this leaflet

We hope that you found this leaflet helpful. If you would like to tell us what you think, please contact: Maternity Services, York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE, Telephone: 01904 726869, Scarborough Hospital, Woodlands Drive, Scarborough, YO12 6QL, Telephone: 01723 236869.

Teaching, training and research

Our Trust is committed to teaching, training and research to support the development of health and healthcare in our community. Healthcare students may observe consultations for this purpose. You can opt out if you do not want students to observe. We may also ask you if you would like to be involved in our research.

Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

PALS offers impartial advice and assistance to patients, their relatives, friends and carers. We can listen to feedback (positive or negative), answer questions and help resolve any concerns about Trust services.

PALS can be contacted on 01904 726262, or email yhs-tr.patientexperienceteam@nhs.net.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Leaflets in alternative languages or formats

If you would like this information in a different format, including braille or easy read, or translated into a different language, please speak to a member of staff in the ward or department providing your care.

Patient Information Leaflets can be accessed via the Trust's Patient Information Leaflet website: www.yorkhospitals.nhs.uk/your-visit/patient-information-leaflets/

Owner	Debbie Sharp, Midwife
Date first issued	November 2017
Review Date	August 2028
Version	7 (issued October 2025)
Approved by	Obstetrics and Gynaecology Clinical Governance Group
Document Reference	PIL467 v7

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