



York Teaching Hospital  
NHS Foundation Trust

# Caring for a baby with drug withdrawal symptoms

Information for patients, relatives and carers

① For more information, please contact:

Scarborough Hospital  
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Tel: 01723 368111

The York Hospital  
Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE  
Tel: 01904 631313

Caring with pride



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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 don't understand or would like to talk about further, please speak with your midwife or other health care professional involved in your care.

## **Will my drug use affect my newborn baby?**

Most drugs, including tobacco and alcohol that you take when you are pregnant pass through the placenta and are absorbed by your baby.

If a mother is dependent or addicted to certain drugs the baby may be born dependent on these too and can develop what is known as Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS). This is a condition where the baby shows signs and symptoms of withdrawal. It occurs often with opiate drugs such as methadone, DF118 or heroin and benzodiazepine drugs such as diazepam or temazepam. At birth, the baby's drug supply stops and the baby may go through a period of withdrawal. Baby withdrawal symptoms can be similar to how adults feel when they suddenly stop taking drugs or go cold turkey.

## **Baby withdrawal symptoms, including things like:**

- High-pitched crying
- Irritability and restlessness
- Tremor or shakiness
- Feeding difficulties, (the baby is often keen to feed but cannot suck or swallow properly)
- Sleeping difficulties, (the baby cannot settle or sleep after a feed)
- Vomiting and or diarrhoea
- Fever
- A sore bottom (due to frequent dirty nappies)
- Occasionally, babies have fits but this is very rare.

Most babies who have been exposed to drugs before birth will have some symptoms after birth. Some babies experience only mild withdrawal symptoms and require no more than the usual care that all babies need. Other babies however, can have severe symptoms where they cannot feed or sleep properly and they lose weight rather than gain weight. These babies usually need medical treatment, including special nursing care and sometimes calming drugs to help them recover.

Unfortunately, there is no way of telling exactly how a baby will react as there are many different factors that affect withdrawal symptoms in babies. The amount of drugs you are taking is only one factor so we like to prepare all parents just in case.

What we can say is that drug withdrawal in babies is fairly common, so you are not alone. Midwives and other maternity staff as well as health visitors and GPs have experience of looking after babies and can offer some good advice and help to parents.

## **Will I get help caring for my baby?**

Mothers who are dependent on drugs are asked to stay in hospital with their baby for at least three to five days (72 -120 hours). This is because most withdrawal symptoms in babies appear within this time period. Methadone and benzodiazepines such as diazepam and temazepam however, can take longer to leave the baby's system and withdrawal signs may not show up for a week or so.

In the postnatal ward you will be encouraged to breastfeed and bond with your baby. The midwife will use a special 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 after three to five days 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 about 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 are keen to offer parents extra help at home and to see how the baby is doing.

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.

If mum is HIV, Hepatitis B or C positive, then baby will need a follow up appointments at the hospital to see a paediatrician (baby doctor).



## Things parents 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.
- Use a dummy, pacifier or soother, unless you are breastfeeding.
- 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.
- 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 well 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 dependent on drugs. In fact, breastfeeding can sometimes help reduce your baby's withdrawal symptoms. Only very small amounts of drugs are passed to the baby through breast milk. The benefits of breastfeeding are so great that they outweigh worries about your continued drug use. The only exceptions to this would be:

- If you are HIV positive.
- If you are drinking heavily.
- If you take large amounts of stimulant drugs such as cocaine, crack or speed or benzodiazepines such as valium.
- If you continue to inject illicit drugs.

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.

You will greatly improve the chances of having a healthy normal baby if you have the support of both drug and maternity services during and after your pregnancy.

We hope that this leaflet has given you enough information to help you prepare for the arrival of your baby. We know that it can be difficult to have a baby with withdrawal symptoms and that many mums feel guilty and 'to blame'. Remember that we are always here to provide you with support and to talk to you about any worries or questions that you may have. Please feel free to speak with your midwife or other health care professional about the information in this leaflet.

## **References:**

Substance Misuse in Pregnancy: A resource book for professionals (2005) Drugscope, London.

Drug misuse and dependence: UK clinical guidelines on clinical management (2017) Dept. of Health

## **How do I contact a midwife?**

Ask your GP or specialist drugs worker to put you in touch with a midwife, or ring the Maternity Reception at Scarborough Hospital on 01723 342124 or The York Hospital on 01904 726720.

## Where can I get more help and advice?

### **York Drug and Alcohol Service:**

01904 46 46 80

3 Blossom Street, York, YO24 1AU

Email: [york@changing-lives.org.uk](mailto:york@changing-lives.org.uk)

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support, including needle exchange for York.

### **North Yorkshire Horizons:**

01723 33 07 30

Website: <http://www.nyhorizons.org.uk/>

[Accessed September 2019]

Operates from five main Hubs across the county:

- Harrogate - 7 North park Road, HG1 5PD
- Northallerton - 5 The Applegarth, DL7 8LZ
- Selby - 74-76 Gowthorpe, YO8 4ET
- Scarborough - 50-60 Castle Road, YO11 1XE
- Skipton - Mill Bridge House, 4A Mill Bridge, BD23 1NJ

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support for North Yorkshire.

### **East Riding partnership:**

01482 33 66 75

7 Baker Street, Hull, HU2 8HP

Integrated community drug and alcohol treatment and support for East Riding.

**Frank:**

0300 123 66 00

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/>

**Substance Misuse Support Group:**

01904 71 54 90

Information, advice and support for carers affected by alcohol and substance misuse. Regular monthly meetings held on the third Wednesday of the month, 1.30 to 3.30pm in the Tesco community room, Tesco, Askham Bar, York, YO24 1LW.

## **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:

Substance Misuse Liaison Service,  
The York Hospital, Wigginton Road, York, YO31 8HE,  
telephone 01904 726559 or email  
substancemisuselianservice@york.nhs.uk.

## **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  
pals@york.nhs.uk.

An answer phone is available out of hours.

Providing care together in York, Scarborough, Bridlington,  
Malton, Selby and Easingwold communities

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