

# Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)

This information sheet aims to answer some commonly asked questions about substance use and when your baby has NAS.

**IMPORTANT:** This is general information only. Ask your doctor or midwife about what care is right for you and your baby.

## What is neonatal abstinence syndrome?

Some substances (medicines prescribed by a doctor, over-the-counter medicines, and recreational drugs) can pass through the placenta to the baby during pregnancy.

After birth, the baby may show signs of withdrawal as they get used to being without the substance. This is called neonatal abstinence syndrome (or NAS). Signs of NAS usually develop a few hours to a few days after birth.

## How do you know your baby has NAS?

The signs of NAS can vary. It depends on the type, the amount, and the number of substances you took while pregnant. Your baby might:

- cry more than usual
- be unsettled and not able to sleep properly
- be shaky or have tremors
- not feed well
- vomit often or have diarrhoea
- get sore and red skin, especially in the nappy area
- have a fever
- have fast breathing or a blocked nose

Severe signs can be seizures or dehydration.

## Can you breastfeed if your baby has NAS?

Breastfeeding is usually the best way to feed your baby and can help with the signs of NAS. Some substances can pass into or build up in breast milk and cause side-effects in your baby. Talk with your healthcare provider about breastfeeding. They will be able to advise you about specific substances and breastfeeding.

## What happens after your baby is born?

If everything else is ok, you and your baby can usually stay together. The midwife looking after you both will check your baby regularly.

Sometimes your baby might need to go to a neonatal unit (nursery) so they can be closely cared for. If your baby needs medication, they will usually need to go to the neonatal unit.

You will still be able to spend as much time as you want to with your baby and feed and care for them. Talk with your baby's health care provider. Questions and discussion about your baby are always welcomed.

## Staying close

Your connection with your baby is very important. Being with your baby as much as possible after birth can help build this connection. Staying close to your baby will help you know when they need you.

## Feeding

Often babies are very hungry and want to feed a lot. You will be able to breastfeed whenever your baby wants to. If you are formula feeding, you will be able to give your baby regular small feeds.

## Comforting

Holding baby next to your skin, cuddling, swaddling (wrapping up), talking or singing softly, baby massage, and generally comforting are the best ways to help your baby.



Image: wrapped baby



## Is medication needed to treat NAS?

Medication is sometimes needed to help manage your baby's signs of NAS. Morphine and/or phenobarbital are the most common medications. The medication is gradually reduced as your baby gets better.

## How long does your baby stay in hospital?

It depends on how things go with you and your baby. It can also depend on the type of substance(s) causing the NAS. For some substances, it is a few days and for others it can be for a week or much longer. Staying in hospital means your baby can be closely watched and given medication if they need it. Your health care provider will give you more information about this.

## What should you do if you take substances after birth?

Taking substances (such as recreational drugs), when you are looking after your baby can be dangerous. You may be sleepy, drowsy or irritable and not able to safely look after your baby.

- if you would like help with your substance use, talk to your healthcare team
- if you do use substances, make sure there is a responsible person able to care for your baby and other children
- if you have been drinking alcohol or taking substances, don't sleep with your baby in a bed, chair or other place
- don't smoke near your baby.
- smoke outside your home, away from your baby, and away from the windows and doors
- remember, it is against the law to smoke in a car carrying children under 16 years old
- talk to your health care provider about the substances you use and the best way to manage breastfeeding

## Will your baby need follow up after you go home?

Yes, if your baby had NAS and especially if they needed medication, follow-up is important. Regularly checking your baby's growth and development helps detect any problems early. Treating problems early gives your baby the best chance for a healthy life. Your healthcare provider will talk with you before you leave hospital about the follow-up your baby needs.

## When should you contact your healthcare provider?

It can be hard to cope with a new baby sometimes, especially if you are feeling tired and stressed. Taking care of yourself is very important for both you and your baby. Talk to your doctor, midwife or child health nurse about the support available to help you stay well, and at any time you are worried about yourself or your baby.



Image: woman and baby skin to skin

### Support & information

**13HEALTH** (13 432584) is a phone line that provides health information, referral and services to the public.

[www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health](http://www.qld.gov.au/health/contacts/advice/13health)

**Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline** 1800 882 436 (free call) offers free, confidential, professional information and counselling for women, their partners and families relating to issues of conception, pregnancy, birthing and postnatal care.

[www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline](http://www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline)

**Lifeline** 13 11 14 Lifeline offers a telephone crisis support service to anyone. [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**Child Health Service** Provides newborn drop-in services, early feeding and support, child health clinics. For your nearest service, see [www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/community-health/child-health-service](http://www.childrens.health.qld.gov.au/community-health/child-health-service)

**Women's Health Queensland Wide** 1800 017 676 (free call) offers health promotion, information and education service for women and health professionals throughout Queensland. [www.womenshealth.org.au](http://www.womenshealth.org.au)

**Australian Breastfeeding Association** 1800 686268 (breastfeeding helpline). Community based self-help group offers information, counselling, and support services, on breastfeeding issues [www.breastfeeding.asn.au](http://www.breastfeeding.asn.au)

**Australian Drug Foundation:** information about drug use in pregnancy and lactation [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**Foundation for alcohol research and education (FARE):** information about drinking alcohol when pregnant or breastfeeding [www.fare.org.au/women-want-to-know](http://www.fare.org.au/women-want-to-know)

**Alcohol and drug information services** (1800 177 833): for help if you or someone you know has problems with alcohol [www.alcohol.gov.au](http://www.alcohol.gov.au)

**Quitline** (13 78 48) provides tailored help and support for pregnant women and their partners to stop smoking

**Red nose:** information about safe sleeping and safe wrapping to help baby settle. Mobile apps available for download [www.rednose.org.au](http://www.rednose.org.au)