

Caring For Your Preemie

From the moment you discover you're expecting a baby, you start to imagine what your baby is going to look like. Will she look like Daddy or Mummy? What colour hair is she going to have? What colour eyes? You spend much of your time picturing this perfect little human being that will soon be coming into your life, watching the perfect looking babies on the TV and thinking to yourself that yours will be even more beautiful than them. You're excited and maybe a little nervous too. Then, complications. You go into labour early. Something's wrong. After the trauma of delivering prematurely you see your baby hooked up to what seems like every machine the hospital could possibly have. She looks like a baby, but your visions of the perfect little bundle of joy have been brutally snatched from your mind. She's tiny; her head looks out of proportion to the rest of her body, her arms and legs are painfully thin and spindly. It breaks your heart to look at her, see her trying to take in the world before she's even properly developed. Instantly, you vow to love that baby more than any parent has ever loved a child. Somehow, you manage to keep it together emotionally, especially in front of your baby. It won't help her to see you in tears. You come out of the woods and get the all-clear to finally take baby home with you. Immediately, you are overjoyed, then extremely nervous. How on earth are you going to care for her when she barely made it through her first worldly experience?

Firstly, do not panic. It doesn't help anyone if you're a nervous wreck. Be calm and this will have a positive effect on your baby. Remember that they can sense how you are feeling, so acting as though a bomb is about to go off is only going to unduly stress your baby. She is totally dependent on you so you can do the best for her before you've even left the hospital by creating a sense of tranquillity.

As with any baby, you need to make sure that your trip home is a safe one for her so have a properly fitted car seat ready. The rear-facing seats are the safest by far, but you must also make sure that it is an adequate size so that it supports her head enough to keep her airways open. Remember that she cannot support her own head yet. Also ensure she is wrapped up snugly: premature babies can get cold much faster than full-term babies because their bodies haven't quite developed the knack for keeping a stable body temperature yet.

When you do get home, try to keep things as quiet and peaceful as possible. Playing your favourite rock album is a definite no-no for the time being. Your baby could hear noises inside the womb but they were very muffled, so coming into the world was also a loud experience as well as a traumatic one. Keeping the noise level to a minimum will remind her of the peacefulness of the womb and help keep her calm. Do ensure, though, that you talk to her softly, as she will remember your voice. A lot of the caring and comforting of your baby will be from a psychological point of view.

Keep a close eye on her feeding. She should be feeding around 8-10 times in a 24 hour period, with no more than 4 hours between each feeding. Any more than 4 hours without a feed can lead to dehydration. You must also make sure that she is getting enough at each feeding. Watch her to see if she swallows regularly and listen for the soft gulping sounds. If breastfeeding, your breast should feel significantly less

full than before the feed. If bottle-feeding, you should notice that she is more contented after feeding and being burped. Around 6-8 wet nappies per 24 hours also indicate a good intake.

Premature babies will sleep more often than a full-term baby. Their bodies still haven't properly developed yet and sleeping is the perfect time for them to start catching up. Again, make sure she doesn't sleep for any more than 4 hours at a time. She should wake up to be fed before then. If she doesn't, wake her for a feed and consult your doctor immediately, just to be on the safe side. When putting her down to sleep, always make sure she is placed on her back to prevent sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), unless you have been told otherwise.

Take advantage of the fact that she is in your arms perhaps a little sooner than you had anticipated by strengthening those emotional bonds from early on. Skin-to-skin contact is very soothing for her. She will feel safe and secure feeling your natural body heat and hearing the familiar sounds of your breathing and heartbeat. The father can, of course, do this too. Undress her down to her nappy and place her on your bare chest with her head turned to one side. This can be a very bonding time for the parents of a premature baby and will reassure her that she is safe and loved. There is also scientific evidence that suggests this skin-to-skin contact has a beneficial effect on the health of a premature baby.

Try to discourage visits from other family members or friends during this time. Not only will too much stimulation unnerve her, but your loved ones may unwittingly infect her with a cold or flu. This can have serious implications for a premature baby, whose immune system has not fully developed. For the same reasons, keep outings to a bare minimum, with the exception of the doctor's clinic and even then, try not to be in close proximity to other people, especially children, who tend to be more susceptible to colds. Also bear in mind that your baby's lungs are still getting to grips with breathing air, so if you smoke, at least don't do it in the house. I would even consider giving it up completely if you haven't already done so, for the sake of your child's health.

Keep in mind that you can't care for your baby in the best possible way if you are overly stressed or too tired. Make sure you have the full support of your partner and your friends and family. A willing friend or family member could do your shopping for you or other errands that you need done so you can spend some time caring for yourself too. Healthy and calm parents encourage a healthy and calm baby.

It is completely normal to feel inadequate over the needs of your premature baby, but you can rest assured that she will do just fine with your care and special attention. Your love for her will keep you on track. Keep in close contact with your child's doctor to make sure everything is going smoothly and contact them immediately if you have the slightest concern: that's what they're there for. Every step forward will bring its own reward, every touch will bring you closer to your baby and every smile she gives you will reassure you that you're on the right road.

Sarah McIver