



# How You Can Participate in the Care of Your Baby in the NICU

During your first days in the NICU, you may feel like unwilling passengers on a ride you never planned to take. You will notice the nurses providing all of the care for your baby, operating complicated pumps, providing medications, changing diapers, tucking in blankets, and so much more. Many parents wonder how they can “be” a parent at times like these when they aren’t doing the “things” that parents usually do for their babies.



As you become more familiar with your baby’s care and preferences, you too will begin to provide these routine care needs. Changing your baby’s diaper, taking a temperature, tucking in blankets, changing clothes, and giving a bath are all skills you will learn; let your nurse know when you are ready to begin learning how to provide these care needs.

Some parents fear that asking to participate in the care of their baby will “get in the way” of the nurse. Remember that you are your baby’s parent. Your baby will go home with you, not the nurses. Rest assured that most nurses are eager to help you become “the expert” in your baby’s care. Sometimes participation is simply “being there.”

Ask about your baby’s schedule, particularly about when feedings are provided, and when your baby is more awake.

Some NICUs welcome parents’ presence during procedures (IV starts, placement of peripherally inserted central catheters, intubation). If you wish to be present during a procedure, please let your baby’s nurse or other care team member know. If you stay in your baby’s room during a procedure, you may be asked to wear a mask or hair cover to help prevent infection. If you begin to feel faint, nauseous, or emotional, let a member of the NICU team know right away so that you can get support immediately.

If your NICU is in an academic institution and you are asked to step out during complex procedures, it is most likely because the health care provider (a resident, for example) is still learning the procedure, asking questions, and possibly requesting help from the supervising physician or neonatal nurse practitioner. In some cases, the procedure is more likely to be successful if the health care provider is not under parent observation.

A provider’s comfort level with a parent’s presence during procedures varies among providers; therefore, it is all right to ask the provider if you may stay. If you make it clear that you will step out at the provider’s request, you may be more successful with making that person comfortable with your presence.

## Learn About Common Terms, Phrases, and Problems

Simply having greater familiarity with the words and concepts you hear in rounds and around the NICU will help you feel more a part of what is happening. Knowledge really is power. The more informed you are, the better you will understand what is happening to your baby. Reading will help. Talking with other parents who have gone through a NICU experience may help (here is where the “veteran” parents can be remarkably helpful). If you like detailed information, ask your baby’s nurse or physician for written materials that explain what is happening to your baby. Many NICUs have a guidebook for their parents that describes common procedures and roles of individuals in that unit. Some NICUs have a parent resource center within the unit with books and even computers for parents to research electronic resources.

When using the Internet for information. Keep in mind that anyone can post information and ideas on the Internet; not all of it is accurate or even truthful. Ask for Web site recommendations from a parent educator, a family resource center specialist, or a member of your baby’s care team.

Your NICU may also have a specialized parent support and training program to help familiarize you with your baby’s anticipated NICU experience. The more you understand, the more effective an advocate you can be for your baby.

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