

# Premature Infants

## Some characteristics of premature infants

- Weigh less and are smaller
- Have smaller bodies in relation to their head size
- Have less fat on their bodies
- Have thin, translucent skin

## Premature Infant Behaviors

Because a premature baby's lungs are not fully developed, your baby may have trouble breathing. Premature babies often need help with feeding because their oral coordination is not fully developed until about 39 weeks of gestational age. Medical staff will monitor your baby's breathing and weight gain. Even though your baby is small and being monitored by doctors and nurses, your baby still needs YOU, your reassurance, and your love. Talking and singing to your baby will help them to feel calmer.

## Coping With Stress of the NICU

When a baby is born early, they receive extra attention and care by the medical personnel at the hospital. Your premature baby may spend time in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) until their body and internal organs are more developed, and they're ready to go home.

Being in the NICU can be stressful. Here are some suggestions for managing stress while in the NICU with your baby:

- Ask to see your baby as soon as possible after delivery
- Care for your baby as much as you can (diaper, feed, hold, etc.)
- Spend as much time in the NICU with your baby as you can.
- Once a baby is stable, many NICUs allow parents to do kangaroo care, which is characterized by skin-to-skin contact while holding your baby. Skin-to-skin contact is more effective in regulating a baby's body temperature than an incubator.
- It is normal to feel awkward, or hesitant, around your baby. Be patient with yourself. Give yourself the time you need to adjust and feel more confident caring for your baby.
- If you are afraid to make mistakes, or show your inexperience, you may find yourself not wanting to spend time with your baby. Talk to one of the staff about your fears. A nurse can support you and help you learn to take care of your baby.
- Some questions to ask the medical team in the NICU:
  - o How is my baby doing today?
  - o Has anything changed?
  - o How will this equipment, or medication, help my baby?
  - o What types of tests are being given to my baby and what information will they provide?
  - o Who is in charge of my baby's medical care?
  - o Whom should I call if I have questions about my baby's condition?
  - o How does the NICU team communicate with me about changes in my baby's condition?
  - o Can I hold my baby?
  - o How can I be involved in the daily care of my baby?

- You can feed your baby once your baby is mature enough to breast- or bottle-feed. NICU staff will teach you feeding techniques that are appropriate for you and your baby.
- Your baby will be ready to go home once they are breathing well on their own, able to maintain body temperature, feeding well, and gaining weight steadily.