

Neonatal intensive care unit offers tips for parents

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Imagine babies so tiny a wedding ring can fit around their arms. Often weighing less than a pound, these remarkably small and sick infants hold onto life hooked up to a maze of tubes and beeping monitors. Although no parent ever prepares for the high-tech environment of a neonatal intensive care unit (NICU), the reality is more than 500,000 babies are born prematurely each year in the United States. This number continues to rise due in part to older women having babies and the increase in multiple births. To prepare parents, UC San Diego Health System provides one-of-a-kind programs to help relieve stress and anxiety during this vulnerable time.

"No parent expects to have their infant in the NICU, but educating parents and families on this environment and the variety of helpful resources we offer throughout the pregnancy is key to being proactive should they deliver a sick or [premature baby](#)," said Janet Hebert, nurse manager for UC San Diego Health System's NICU.

Lauren Wood knows first hand what it's like to spend time in the NICU. Her daughter, Payton, was born at 30 weeks, weighed just over three pounds and lived in UC San Diego Health System's NICU for 56 days.

"Being in the NICU is like an emotional roller coaster. You have good days and bad days. My husband and I wrote in a journal every night to keep things in perspective and celebrate our baby's milestones. It will also be something special for Payton to read one day," said Wood.

Hebert offers these tips to parents:

- **Build a Support Circle:** Having a sick infant is stressful, and parents go through a grieving process because they did not have a term pregnancy as expected. A support network can include physicians and neonatal nurse practitioners, social workers, occupational therapists, lactation consultants and volunteer staff. Parents must build trusting relationships with their caregivers to allow for open communication and learn how to care for their infant. Family and friends want to help, so parents should consider having them prepare meals, clean the house, run errands, drive mom to the hospital and assist in preparing the nursery for discharge. For some families, spiritual support is also helpful during this time, and UC San Diego [Health System](#) offers a clergy service. To facilitate communication, UC San Diego Health System recently launched CarePages, a free site for patients to share their stories and build a support circle.
- **Ask About Free Services:** UC San Diego Health System pioneered the first NICU Concierge Program where volunteers provide parents with services, such as checking in breastmilk, providing a rocking chair and other comfort amenities, taking pictures of the family, creating bedside name cards and offering educational materials on support activities. Most parents in the NICU admit to being nervous about touching or picking up their fragile babies, but studies have shown how important the human touch is to healing. UC San Diego Health System promotes skin-to-skin contact for parents and their newborns. We also offer the Cuddler Program where volunteers have the opportunity to comfort babies around the clock.
- **Tiny Babies Can Be Breastfed:** Breastfeeding is a challenge with a sick or premature baby but vital to its survival and normal development. Premature babies will have to grow significantly to be able to perform this complex and high energy function. Breastfeeding is the one thing

that a mother can provide that normalizes her parenting when she often feels helpless in the NICU. UC San Diego Health System developed the nationally acclaimed Supporting Premature Infant Nutrition (SPIN) program to help mothers produce sufficient milk for their premature infants. The program has recently launched online with educational videos and a variety of resources like pumping log sheets and milk recipes. Learn more at spinprogram.ucsd.edu

- **Remember Couple Quality Time:** A sick infant in the hospital puts a serious strain on relationships and stresses families financially, especially when there are other siblings involved. Sleep deprivation adds to this strain along with any complications that the mother may have in recovery. Create a sleep schedule with your partner and remember to plan quality time with each other outside of the hospital setting.

Provided by UC San Diego Health System

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