

Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)

What is Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)?

NAS is when a baby is exposed to a substance, drug or medicine in the womb and once born, goes through withdrawal from that substance. Some people refer to this as “coming down from” or “coming off of” a substance. NAS is seen in nearly half of all babies who are exposed in the womb. The most common substances are opiates: Subutex, codeine, heroin, hydrocodone, and methadone.

How can you tell a baby has NAS?

A way to tell if a baby has NAS is by using a system called NAS scoring. NAS scoring is a way to look at different symptoms a baby may show (many are listed below) to let us know if they need medicine.

If we know the baby has a drug or substance in their body because of a urine, stool, or other test, we will watch them closely for 72 hours after delivery for some of the symptoms listed below. If we anticipate the baby may have withdrawal based on medications mom used during pregnancy, we will watch the baby for the following symptoms:

- Irritability
- Increased muscle tone
- Poor feeding
- Vomiting
- Sneezing
- Mottling of skin
- Fever
- Shakiness
- Frequent yawning
- Constant sucking
- Loose/watery stools
- Seizures
- Increased sweating

The baby may show some, all or none of the above symptoms.

Is NAS dangerous?

Some symptoms can lead to very serious problems in babies. Increased fluid loss from vomiting or loose stools can cause babies to become dehydrated and feed poorly. NAS could lead to developmental and behavior problems later in life. The worst problem is seizures and convulsions. Seizures that last a long time, can decrease oxygen flow to the brain causing injury, permanent disability, or even death.

Can I still breastfeed or provide breastmilk for a baby with NAS?

Moms who have been on methadone or Subutex can still provide breastmilk for their baby! Breastmilk can help with withdrawal symptoms. Talk to your baby’s doctor if you are interested in breastfeeding or if you have any questions.

How is NAS treated?

NAS is treated with comforting measures such as swaddling, feeding, holding and decreasing light and noise. However, some infants may need medicine. In these cases, NAS is treated by “bringing the baby down slowly,” or giving the baby a slowly-decreasing amount of the drug they were exposed to in the womb (in the case of opiates). We can also give the baby other medicines to help calm them or prevent seizures (in the case of many other substances).

Did I do this to my baby?

Many cases of withdrawal are hard to prevent. It is critical that parents and caregivers take care of themselves so that they can care for their children. Treatment programs often prescribe medicines to help mothers end their addiction, in which case withdrawal of those prescribed medicines in the baby can be likely. The best way to prevent NAS is to never expose your growing baby to drugs or substances. There are times when it is impossible and we understand that. If you struggle with substance use or addiction, talk to your healthcare provider! There are many resources available to help you. Please know that your treatment team isn't here to judge you—we're here to help keep you and your baby safe and healthy!

What Can I Do as a Parent or Caregiver?

The first and most important thing a caregiver or parent can do in helping a baby recover from NAS is to BE PRESENT as much as possible. Pay close attention to your care team's instructions: there will be good times to hold your baby, and bad times to disturb your baby. Ask questions about your baby if you do not understand something. Most of all, BE PATIENT. Treatment of NAS can often take a long time, as babies must be very slowly weaned from a substance to ensure their safety.