



# NEONATAL ABSTINENCE SYNDROME (NAS)

## What is NAS?

Infant withdrawal or Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS) happens when a baby has been exposed to opiates (including heroin, methadone, buprenorphine and suboxone), stimulants, inhalants, sedatives, alcohol and some antidepressant medication during pregnancy. It is not possible to predict before birth which babies may develop NAS. NAS is not related to the mother's dose of methadone, buprenorphine or suboxone. Pregnant women who combine these medications with other drugs such as heroin, crystal methamphetamine ('ice') or benzodiazepines ('benzos') are more likely to have babies who need medication to help them through their withdrawal.

NAS is easily diagnosed and treated.

Most babies in this situation will show some signs of NAS, but not all will require treatment with medication. Non-medication treatment involves the use of supportive therapy such as swaddling, cuddling and use of pacifiers in a quiet environment with reduced stimulation. Many babies benefit from receiving additional formula feeds during the first few days of establishing breastfeeding to help them settle.

## Assessing your baby's NAS

Babies who may develop signs of NAS are observed carefully after their birth.<sup>1</sup> Babies are assessed every three to four hours (between 30 minutes and one hour after each feed) to observe for signs of withdrawal. The midwife will observe your baby's sleeping, feeding, skin colour, muscle tone and cry. Common signs of withdrawal include irritability, increased crying, poor feeding, stiffness of the muscles and tremors.

This assessment continues for at least five days after the birth. If your baby has not developed significant signs of NAS (and there are no other health issues) you and your baby will be discharged from hospital. A hospital domiciliary midwife will visit you at home and refer you to your local doctor and Maternal and Child Health Nurse for ongoing support and care.

## Treatment

If your baby develops significant signs of NAS, they will be transferred to the Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU). There may be a further period of assessment or medication may be started. During the treatment period, babies continue to be observed for signs of withdrawal. The NICU staff will keep you informed about your baby's condition, progress and the treatments being used. Occasionally more than one medication is needed to treat the baby's withdrawal. Once the withdrawal has been stabilised medication is gradually reduced which takes approximately four weeks.

You and your family will be encouraged to spend as much time as possible with your baby during the treatment period. Babies respond very well to your voice and smell. You provide them with a sense of security.

The Newborn Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at the Women's has a cuddler program, which uses volunteers to cuddle and comfort your baby at times when you cannot be present. This happens under the supervision of specialised NICU staff.

## Breastfeeding

Breastfeeding is of great benefit to your baby. NICU staff can give you the support you need to breastfeed your baby. You should not breastfeed your baby if you are using heroin, 'ice' or are HIV positive. If you are on any drugs besides methadone, buprenorphine or suboxone, this may affect the safety of breastfeeding your baby.

Discuss the safety of breastfeeding with your doctor or midwife.

## For more information

### On the Women's website

[www.thewomens.org.au/wm-pregnancy-drugs-alcohol](http://www.thewomens.org.au/wm-pregnancy-drugs-alcohol)

### Women's Alcohol and Drug Service

Royal Women's Hospital  
8.30am–5.30pm Monday to Friday  
Tel: (03) 8345 3931  
Email: [wads@thewomens.org.au](mailto:wads@thewomens.org.au)

### DirectLine

DirectLine is part of Turning Point's state-wide telephone service network, providing 24-hour, seven day counselling, information and referral to alcohol and drug treatment and support services throughout Victoria. DirectLine is a free, anonymous and confidential service. | Tel: 1800 888 236

### Quit

Visit this website to help you quit or help you find out more about how smoking harms you.  
Tel: 137848 | [www.quit.org.au](http://www.quit.org.au)

### Red Nose

Tel: 1300 308 307 | [www.rednose.com.au](http://www.rednose.com.au)

### Ask your health care provider for the following booklets

*Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome*

*Pathways to Positive Parenting: Information for pregnant women who are using alcohol and drugs*

## Reference

1. In Australia, a modified Finnegan scoring system is used to assess the level of withdrawal in newborn babies.