

Comprehensive **NICU Discharge Planning**

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Q: What are the biggest challenges families face when bringing their baby home from the NICU?

The biggest challenge for families is transitioning from having multiple teams of professionals monitoring and caring for their baby to being on their own with no monitoring equipment or professionals. Many parents have only experienced parenthood while in the NICU, so they do not know what to expect during their first night alone.

Q: Currently, how are parents prepared by hospital staff to take their baby home from the NICU?

The discharge process varies widely between hospitals, which is a problem in itself. Some require parents to spend the night in the NICU before the baby is discharged, while others focus on education that can be verbally communicated or printed out. Overall, there is no consistent process to assist parents with discharge and their transition home.

Q: What is comprehensive NICU discharge planning, and why is it critical for families?

Comprehensive NICU discharge planning begins when a baby is admitted and helps families understand what to expect, outcomes to achieve and criteria that must be met for discharge. It is about helping parents feel confident and competent in taking care of their baby.

Premature babies in the NICU have the highest rates of hospital readmission, which makes leaving the NICU very stressful. However, when parents receive comprehensive NICU discharge planning, their baby is less likely to be readmitted or visit the emergency room.

Q: What tools and resources help ease the transition home for NICU families?

Every family is different, so it starts with understanding a family's individual needs. Clear communication and individualized, tailored support are essential to make sure the family understands what to expect in the present and future.

One way that hospitals can support NICU families is by adopting app-based technologies that provide tailored educational resources, information and reminders that help guide families through their NICU journey and at home after their baby is discharged.

Another way that hospitals can support NICU families is through peer support groups. For example, having support groups with mothers and fathers together. In my experience leading a NICU dads' support group, what happens during delivery has a profound impact on fathers. For many, the support group is the first time they have told their story. It can be very reassuring and validating for all parents.

Q: How can hospitals address the emotional and psychological needs of parents during the discharge process?

The NICU levies an emotional toll on parents. Research shows that mothers are at greater risk of experiencing postpartum depression and anxiety during their baby's NICU stay, while fathers tend to face a greater risk later, once they are home and the immediate crisis has passed. That is why it is important to direct parents to resources that can be used throughout their NICU stay and post-discharge. It is also important to remind parents that even if they feel okay now, the anxiety and stress of having a child in the NICU may unexpectedly resurface later on.

Q: How can hospitals better support coordination between providers post-discharge?

In many cases, the family's health care providers outside the NICU are less familiar with the baby than the NICU staff. It is essential to connect with these providers, share information on the baby's medical history and NICU experience and let them know that the NICU staff is a resource for them. Existing phone applications could help with this coordination as they host detailed records from a baby's time in the NICU, can help parents track their baby's progress and help facilitate ongoing communication with their baby's providers.

Families should also understand that NICU follow-up visits are essential. The NICU team is uniquely equipped to monitor the baby's progress and recognize potential concerns after discharge.

Q: How can policymakers, health care providers and families work together to improve the discharge process and long-term outcomes for NICU families?

Policymakers can prioritize policies that ensure comprehensive NICU discharge planning resources are accessible and take advantage of cutting-edge technology, reduce the out-of-pocket costs families face with a medically fragile child and develop dedicated family leave policies that support NICU families.



The National Coalition for Infant Health is a collaborative of professional, clinical, community and family support organizations.

The coalition focuses on education and advocacy promoting patient-centered care for all infants—whether born preterm or full term—and their families.

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