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Help for parents of premature babies

if you're the mom or dad of a premature baby, it's safe to say things didn't go exactly as you had planned or hoped. No doubt you're dealing with a lot of emotions and you probably have many, many questions. You're not alone. About 12 percent of U.S. births are considered premature, which means your baby arrived before 37 weeks of gestation. The rate of premature

births in the U.S. has increased 30 percent since 1981 and about 1 in 7 births in Palm Beach County is considered premature. It's not something that only happens to moms who drink and smoke or don't take good care of themselves during pregnancy. It can happen to anyone. So start by letting go of any guilt you may have and get ready to learn about the challenges and joys of caring for your newborn.

There is a lot of help out there for you and sound advice from experts like Sandy Munoz, CEO of the Children's Healing Institute, which runs the TEACUP Preemie Program® in Palm Beach County. We recently spoke with her.

Q: WHAT SERVICES DO YOU OFFER?

Often parents of premature infants are distraught, overwhelmed and financially stressed. We provide resources and support these parents in Palm Beach County, while the baby is in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) and after they come home. We hold monthly support groups at Bethesda Hospital East and Wellington Regional Medical Center, and twice-monthly support groups at St. Mary's Medical Center for preemie parents and other caretakers. We connect parents with appropriate medical providers and community services they'll need to ensure the well-being of their preemie. And to mothers in need, we loan hospital-grade breast pumps, so they can provide their baby with breast milk- the best medicine for a preemie.



Q: WHAT'S UNIQUE ABOUT THE TEACUP PREEMIE PROGRAM®?

There aren't any local organizations that do what we do. We offer holistic support; we help families while their baby is in the NICU and when they leave the hospital. The transition and adjustment to being home is tough. Suddenly, that constant professional medical support is gone and they're on their own. We stay by their side to make sure they feel confident in their ability to care for and parent their preemie. We also help them be good advocates for their babies.

Q: HOW DOES SOMEONE CONNECT WITH YOUR ORGANIZATION?

We welcome parents to reach out to us directly, via phone or our website. We often connect with families through referrals from the hospital neonatal intensive care units (NICUs), lactation consultants, and WIC (women, infants and children) offices.

Q: WHAT CHALLENGES SHOULD PARENTS OF A PREEMIE EXPECT?

Well, parenting a preemie certainly comes with challenges! Many people

don't realize that when a baby comes early, they're not just "small" – all of their body systems still have to develop, just like they do in the womb. Premies can spend weeks, even months in the NICU while their bodies grow strong enough to safely go home. The long NICU days, and both physical and emotional exhaustion make for a challenging situation for preemie parents.

But honestly, if there's a silver lining in this cloud, it's right here. It's downright miraculous to watch your baby's growth and development happening right before your eyes. We always read what to expect during pregnancy, what organs or body systems develop during what week, and what size the baby is (this week, your baby is an avocado!).

If a preemie parent can reframe the crisis of preterm birth into an opportunity to watch a miracle happening, they often find themselves feeling more hopeful and balanced. Sometimes parents need help reaching this perspective, as the NICU experience is fraught with fear at times. This is where the support groups come in handy. Moms and dads who have reached the other side of the NICU experience can offer their perspective to other parents who are new to the NICU and still emotionally raw in a lot of ways.

The TEACUP Preemie Program® helps parents cope with the challenges of preemie parenthood. It's important for them to know that they are not alone.

PARENTS OF PREEMIES

While your baby is in the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit)...

- Your NICU nurse is a priceless resource. As you navigate the world of a premature baby, hospital staff can provide care for your newborn and support for you.
- There is no such thing as a silly question. Good NICU staff will be happy to help you understand; they understand what you're going through and can be a source of calm and perspective.
- Talk to your baby. Your voice and scent can be recognized. Avoid strong perfumes and deodorants that might mask your comforting scent.
- Ask about the machines and what they do. It will help calm your fears a little to understand how each beep and buzz is helping your baby to grow stronger.
- Perform caring tasks. As soon as you're allowed to, undertake washing and diaper changes. You may be afraid to harm your precious, fragile bundle but your touch and love is the most healing thing of all. When allowed, snuggle your baby against your chest with as much skin-to-skin contact as possible. Your warmth and heartbeat will be soothing to her.
- Measure milestones. It can be weeks or months before you can take your preemie home. Encourage yourself by noting and celebrating each milestone she reaches. Take photographs or journal about her progress. It will give you hope and strength.
- Use a firm touch. You may want to caress your preemie as gently as a feather but her skin can be ultra-sensitive. Often, firm but gentle hand pressure on one place like your baby's back is most reassuring.
- Lean on friends and family. Tell your support network exactly what you need. Do you want to talk about it? Do you need some time away from talking about it? They aren't mind-readers and may be afraid to "bother" you by asking. Tell them exactly what will help. Good friends will want to be there for you.
- Practice self care. You're on a journey that will include both worry and joy. Keep yourself healthy and try to find balance. You will not be judged for taking some time off for yourself. Remember, your baby gets her sense of security from your stability and peace.
- Keep encouraging yourself. The time is coming when you will take your beautiful baby home. And when you do, there will be help to support you through that next stage.

Contact the TEACUP Preemie Program® at Programs@ChildrensHealingInstitute.org or 561-687-8115, ext. 1003.



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