

Parents on a neonatal journey can often find it overwhelming. Finding the balance to look after yourself is often forgotten. With high stress, physical and mental exhaustion, changes to routine and often a lack of sleep, it's little wonder some parents start to feel anxious and as if they have less control over their lives.



If you are on a neonatal journey, think REF!

Rest. Exercise. Food.

A parent's natural instinct is to put all of their focus into looking after their precious new baby.

However, this can often come at the detriment of looking after yourself. Rest, Exercise and Nutrition may fall by the wayside.

Taking care of yourself is especially important so you can give your baby the best possible care and attention.

A happy, rested and high functioning parent enhances the health of your baby. We know this intuitively. Numerous studies have also shown babies do better being interacted with, read to and cuddled (etc). These are all things parents are more likely to do if they are feeling good themselves.

Rest

Everyone knows a new baby means broken sleep, but nobody can prepare you for just how sleep deprived you may be. This can be even more so when it comes to having a sick or premature baby.

A lack of sleep has a huge impact on how you are feeling and can cause parents to fall into a pit of exhaustion-induced despair.

Try and rest when you can. Yes, easier said than done. But activities like reading a magazine, sitting with your feet up, having a warm bath or just lying down are beneficial for recharging your batteries a little.

If you can, share the load with your partner or a friend. Taking turns can really make a huge difference. This might be a little trickier for breastfeeding mums, so if this is the case try and rest whenever possible.

If you're struggling to get to sleep due to stress, try learning some relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises or guided imagery. Turn off electronics or face them away from you (nothing worse than watching the clock!) and try not to worry if you don't fall asleep immediately.

Exercise

There is evidence galore which shows a link between exercise and good mental well being.

Exercise relieves tension and stress, boosts physical and mental energy, and enhances your overall self esteem. It has even been shown that physical activity can help with mild depression and anxiety.

New mums should start gently as your body has been through a lot. Perhaps try a walk around the block, a bit of gentle stretching, or exercise such as yoga. Look in your area; there may be some mother and baby exercise classes available where the two of you can 'workout' together if your baby is well enough.

There are many online videos which you can try if getting out of the house is difficult. Even ten minutes here and there will do you a world of good. But don't take on too much too soon, and make sure you've got the all clear from your doctor or midwife before attempting any kind of exercise – particularly if you've had surgery.

Food

Eating well and regularly can be particularly difficult at the best of times, but especially hard when you're on a neonatal journey. It's easy to forget yourself when there is a little one needing you. Yet this is the time when it is really important to nourish your body regardless of whether you're breastfeeding or not. This will help you face some of the challenges and demands you have.

Here are a few tips from parents who have been on a neonatal journey:

- If friends and family ask what they can do to help, don't be afraid to ask them for meals that you can then pop into your freezer to use when time is precious or you're too exhausted to cook. People love to help and are usually more than happy to assist
- Try to keep it simple – with time restraints, you probably won't have the energy for too much cooking. Try salads or veggies with some lean meat, chicken or canned fish with wholegrain bread
- Have some snacks on hand. Fresh fruit, yoghurt, nuts, cheese and boiled eggs are just a few ideas. Be sure to stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water
- If getting out to the shops is difficult then perhaps try online shopping and investigate veggie boxes or other meal delivery schemes. Friends might even be able to help by doing your groceries for you
- If you're breastfeeding, you may like to try making a batch of lactation boosting cookies or even better, give the recipe to a friend to make them for you!

Remember to look after yourself. It's only through REF that you will have the strength and energy to look after your new baby.

For more support resources, head to www.neonataltrust.org.nz/support