

Tips for Dad's

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Becoming a new dad can bring joy but fathers often have a difficult role when their baby is born sick or prematurely. The experience can leave dads feeling torn juggling the demands of their new baby/babies, partner and other children while still having to deal with other financial responsibilities. You may feel many mixed emotions after the birth and worry for your baby and partner as this is not how you expected the journey to begin.

Whilst we recognise everyone is different, and react to stress differently, here are a few tips from other dads who have travelled this journey.

While in the unit:

Start a blog.

Keeping everyone in the loop with what is going on and your baby's progress can be rather time consuming and being able to do something tangible can be a great outlet for emotions. An idea is to start a blog so that friends and family members can all be updated at once. You may find it easier to ask a trusted IT literate friend to help you set this up and they could relay the information for you. Here's a fellow dad's example of his ups and downs on their journey ([click here](#))

Skin to Skin (Kangaroo cuddles).

When the doctors give the all clear, kangaroo cuddles are a great way to bond with your baby. Holding your baby for the first time can be an amazing but scary experience, he/she is tiny and fragile but the nursing staff will be there to help you. You can read more about the benefits of kangaroo cuddles [here](#).

Read to your baby.

This might sound crazy but reading a book to your baby is a one on one special experience which has real benefits to your child. It exposes your baby to the sound of your voice which is soothing and helps with bonding. Research shows the more a baby is read to when they are younger the larger their vocabulary will be.

Be hands on.

It can be difficult to feel connected to your baby. Being hands on with the care of him/her is a good way to build confidence. The nursing staff will be able to show you the best way to help with changing nappies, bathing and tube feeding. It's important to note that premature/sick babies can be over stimulated and stressed easily so it's a good idea to check with the nurse to see how much activity your baby can handle.

Ask questions / stay informed.

A neonatal unit can be a world of unfamiliar medical terms and acronyms. There really is no such thing as a silly question and the more informed you are the better you will feel about the decisions you need to make. A good starting point is the glossary in the 'What to expect' booklet produced by The Neonatal Trust.

How to support your partner:

Men and women cope differently and the birth of a sick or premature baby can put a great deal of stress on you both. You may feel like you're unsure as to the best way to support your partner through this emotional time. Often mums are too tired, sore, uncomfortable and overwhelmed to be able to express their needs. Some ideas to help are:

- Bring food in for your partner, they will greatly appreciate it
- Dealing with other children, bringing them in for short visits (if appropriate)
- If your partner is expressing her milk, offering to clean the feeding equipment, putting milk in the fridge/freezer or delivering it to the hospital when necessary is a great way to help
- Many mums feel responsible for their baby's condition. Listen to her concerns but reassure her it's not her fault
- Some mums are unable to spend time in NICU. If this is the case, taking photos, relaying all information and sharing details of the day to day care is extremely important
- Let her know she's doing a great job, praise her for everything she is doing, she will appreciate hearing this from you
- Be patient, it could be a long journey for the both of you. Emotional changes will play a huge part in how she is feeling so talk to her and try to understand how she is coping
- Remember you may not always be on the same 'page'. You and your partner may feel a lot of the same feelings but not always at the same time.

Remember to accept help.

Friends and family are vital at this time of need. However, some aren't good at dealing with this sort of situation and simply don't know what to do to help. It is a good idea to create a list of practical things they could do, such as:



Emotions and taking care of you

Having a premature or sick baby in NICU/SCBU is a stressful time and can put a huge strain on your relationship with your partner but the experience can also bring you both closer as you ride the journey together. Your emotions may be very intense, ranging from stress, anxiety, grief and helplessness, to hope, pride and love. It's important to note that all feelings are normal and most men will experience them.

With everything going on it can sometimes seem like your needs and feelings are forgotten. Talk to your partner, friend or a family member – well, anyone you trust and are comfortable with.

Taking care of yourself is extremely important. Ensure that you get enough sleep, eat well and take a break to relieve stress (such as reading, exercise, a hobby etc). This will make a huge difference to how you support your family unit and your overall feelings.

There may be occasional days where you or your partner feel flat or irritable, this is normal but dads can get postnatal depression too so, if emotional changes persist more than 2 weeks, then this could be a sign of depression.

Some of the key signs are:

- Constantly feeling down or hopeless
- Having little interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy. Depression should be taken seriously so if you have any doubt please see your GP or call the depression helpline **0800 111 757**.

Returning to work

Deciding when the best time to return to work is sometimes difficult. You may feel like it's important to meet financial obligations and then feel torn. It might be an idea to have a chat to your employer and see if you can sort out an arrangement to work part time or perhaps it is better to work and take some time off later when baby is at home. Regardless, it's something that needs discussion with your employer and partner.

Every dad copes differently with the birth of a sick or premature baby so take pride in all that you're doing to alleviate the situation. You're on a rollercoaster of a journey.

We hope this information helps make your difficult start to life that little bit easier.