When can my baby go home? In most cases, parents can take their baby home once the baby is able to do certain things without help:

- Breathe — Your baby must be able to breathe without any help from equipment. The baby should have a period of time with no prolonged pauses in breathing (that is, no ▶ apnea). In a few cases, babies may be sent home with oxygen support and parents are shown how to use this.
- Eat and grow — Your baby must be able to suck from the breast or a bottle and must be gaining weight at a healthy rate.
- Keep warm — Your baby must be able to keep his or her body heat stable while fully clothed in an open crib. In most cases, babies who weigh more than 4 pounds (2,000 grams) can maintain their temperature.

Sometimes, a baby must remain in the neonatal intensive care unit (NICU) a while longer if he or she still has other health problems. You may be asked to “room in” with your baby (stay overnight in the NICU) shortly before discharge to help you learn how to address any issues your baby may have during the night.

What is the purpose of a discharge process? Babies born premature or with health problems have unique needs that also must be met at home. Leaving the watchful care of the NICU staff can be stressful for parents. For instance, along with the issues listed above (breathing, feeding, keeping warm), other unique needs that may be addressed at home include:

- checking your baby for signs and symptoms of infection and jaundice
- safely giving your baby medicines
- learning about infant cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR)
- learning about car seat safety (small babies may have breathing problems when placed in a car seat, so you should know how to use a car seat)
- tracking the growth and change in your baby’s motor skills and ▶ emotional balance (neurodevelopment)
- follow-up visits to check for healthy growth, nutrition, hearing, and vision in your baby

Problems may quickly become serious for premature babies after discharge; yet, studies show that thorough follow-up care and prompt treatment of problems can help avoid further health problems and returns to the hospital.*

With so many details to track, it is helpful to have a structured discharge process designed around your baby’s unique needs. The purpose of the discharge process is to make sure all aspects of your baby’s needs are addressed before you go home. This includes looking not only at aspects of your baby’s health, but also at the unique needs he or she may have at home, any special training required, and linking you to sources of help within your community. The people involved in the discharge process may include your baby’s nurses, doctors, a social worker or care coordinator, and the baby’s primary care doctor. The discharge process varies with every NICU — for some, it may occur within one day; for others, it may occur over several days. Hospitals also will have forms for you to sign and/or discharge requirements to discuss with you.

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises that the discharge process should include:

- educating parents about their baby’s needs
- helping parents find and contact a primary care doctor for the baby
- arranging for follow-up care
- developing a plan of care for home
- locating and coordinating other services for support and help at home
- assessing the baby for medical problems


What should parents do? There are many key actions you should take to help your baby make the move from the NICU to home. Below is a general list of key steps you should follow.

✔ Work with your baby’s health care team to make sure the steps listed in the box above take place and to make sure all your questions are answered.

✔ Know what tests have been done for your baby before leaving the hospital and what tests still need to be done.

✔ Record details about your baby, such as tests performed before discharge, medicines to take home, training received, and other details.

✔ Make a list of the names and phone numbers of your baby’s main doctor and any other health care providers.

✔ Know when your baby is due for checkups and be sure to take him or her to every checkup advised, including recommended visits to a specialist.
Ask if a copy of your baby’s discharge summary is available.* This is a copy of the medical notes made about your baby while in the NICU that gives details about health problem(s), treatment, medicine(s), follow-up needs, other types of medical help advised, and what information parents have been given. Make a copy for your baby’s primary doctor and keep a copy of this file at home — it may be useful if you change doctors or move to another town/state.

Know what signs may show your baby is having health problems and who to contact if this occurs. Make sure you receive training about car seats, giving medicines, and other special issues about your baby’s care. Read to keep up-to-date about special aspects of your baby’s care, such as feeding and sleep.

Look into costs involved with your baby’s care. If you have health insurance, find out what is covered. If you do not have health insurance or if your plan does not cover all your baby’s needs, find out about other sources of help.

Take time out to care for yourself. Keep in mind that you have been through a stressful time and that reducing your own stress also will be helpful for your baby.

It is important that you get all of your questions answered before you bring your baby home.

Building bridges to care. Leaving the NICU is a change for you and for your baby. The discharge process is like crossing a bridge from one care setting to another. Not only do you need to know what to do and how to handle issues at home, but you also need to be sure there are doctors and nurses available to help you, your baby, and your family through the years ahead.

Moving forward . . . talk to your baby’s doctors and nurses about these issues:

- How soon can I return to work?
- When can I place my baby in day care?
- When can I leave my baby with other care providers?

► Take a closer look at these Pediatrix topics

► apnea - F3 - Apnea of prematurity
► emotional balance - B1 - About premature babies

This information is for educational purposes only and is not intended to substitute for professional medical advice. Always consult with a healthcare professional if you have any questions about the health of your baby.

E1 - Going home with your baby: about the discharge process