



NICU Words and What They Mean

(Glossary of Medical Terms)

Abscess

Pocket of pus under the skin. It may come after an infection.

Alveoli

Small air sacs in the lung.

Antibiotics

Medicines used to treat some kinds of infection.

Anemia

A condition where a baby's body has a lower red blood cell count than normal.

Apnea

A pause in breathing which lasts more than 20 seconds. The baby's colour may become pale or blue, and the baby's heart rate may slow down.

Aspirates

Stomach contents that have not been digested and are "aspirated" from the stomach through the feeding tube before a feeding.

Bilirubin

A substance produced when the body breaks down red blood cells.

Blood pressure (BP) monitor

A machine to measure blood pressure either with a cuff wrapped around the arm, or through a tube into one of the arteries.

Bradycardia

Heart rate less than 100 beats per minute.

Bronchopulmonary dysplasia (BPD)

A lung disease that may occur in babies who have had severe lung disease, or who were very premature. Also called "chronic lung disease".

Cerebral spinal fluid (CSF)

The fluid around the brain and spinal cord.

Chest tube

A tube put into the space around the lung to drain air or fluid that has collected there.

Colostrum

The breast milk made in the first few days after birth. It has many cells that protect babies from infections.

Continuous Positive Airway Pressure (CPAP)

Air and Oxygen is given under a small amount of pressure through little tubes that fit into the nostrils of the baby's nose. This helps keep the air sacs in the lungs open so that it is easier for your baby to breathe.

CT Scan

A "Computerized Tomography" scan gives a 3D view of the body's organs and structures.

Ductus arteriosus

A blood vessel outside the heart that allows most of the blood to bypass the lungs and go to the rest of the body before birth.

Echocardiogram

A test that uses sound waves to give a picture of the heart.

Endotracheal tube (ET tube)

A tube that goes from the mouth or nose into the windpipe (trachea).

Full-term baby

A baby born 3 weeks or less before their due date, or at a gestational age of 37 weeks or more.

Gavage feeding

Feeding through a small tube placed into the mouth or nose and down to the stomach. Also called tube feeding.

Gestational age

The number of completed weeks of pregnancy (since the mother's first day of her last menstrual period).

Gram

A unit to measure weight. 454 grams equals one pound.

Grunting

An "ugh" sound made by the baby with each breath. It happens when a baby is working too hard to breathe.



Heel stick or prick

A tiny puncture of the skin in the baby's heel using a small, sharp instrument. It is done to collect blood for testing.

Hematocrit

The percentage of red blood cells in the blood.

Hemoglobin

The part of the red blood cell that carries oxygen.

Hemodynamics service

A group of Neonatologists trained in the use of tNECHO and other physiological markers that help to put together a complete picture of the blood circulation of a patient.

Hernia

A bulge of a loop of bowel from the abdomen into an area where it normally would not be.

Human milk fortifier (HMF)

A powder added to breast milk to meet the special needs of premature infants.

Hydrocele

Extra fluid in the scrotal sac (by the testicles) of boys.

Hydrocephalus

Too much fluid in the normal fluid spaces of the brain (ventricles).

Hyperbilirubinemia

Too much bilirubin in the blood.

Hypothermia

Cold treatment.

Hypoxic ischemic encephalopathy (HIE)

Damage to cells in the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) from inadequate oxygen.

Incubator

A bed for a sick baby that gives warmth and humidity.

Inguinal hernia

A *hernia* in the groin in girls and in the scrotum of boys.

Intraventricular hemorrhage (IVH)

Bleeding into or around the normal fluid spaces (ventricles) within the brain.

Intravenous (IV)

A needle or tube placed into a vein and attached to a bag or syringe of fluid.

Intubation

An endotracheal (ET) tube put into the baby's windpipe through the mouth.

Isolette

A common term for an incubator, a bed that warms the baby.

Jaundice/Hyperbilirubinemia

Yellowing of the skin and eyes due to a build up of *bilirubin* in the blood. Jaundice is treated with special lights which help the baby break down the bilirubin.

Lanugo

Fine, soft downy hair that is often seen on the back and shoulders of preterm babies.

Laser therapy

A treatment using high energy in a beam of light.

Late pre-term baby

A baby who is born at a gestational age of 34-36 weeks.

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI)

MRI machines give pictures of the body's organs and structures.

Meningitis

Inflammation of the tissue covering the brain and spinal cord.

Minimal enteral feeds

Feeding of a very small amount of milk. Not enough to give nutrition. Meant to prepare the bowel of a premature baby.

Monitors

Machines that measure and display readings like the heart beat or the oxygen level.

Nasal CPAP

A small amount of air pressure given by a ventilator through little tubes that fit into the baby's nostrils. See also "*Continuous Positive Airway Pressure*" (CPAP).

Nasal flaring

Widening of the baby's nostrils with each breath.



Nasal prongs/cannula

A small soft tube placed into the nostrils that gives extra oxygen.

Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)

An inflammation causing damage to part of the bowel.

Neonatal neuro intensive care (NNIC)

A comprehensive assessment of a premature baby's neurological status by a trained team with a strong interest in the newborn brain.

Open bed

A bed that provides controlled warmth to a baby without needing to use a closed incubator or blankets. Also called an "infant warmer".

Ostomy

An opening from an area inside the body to the outside.

Patent ductus arteriosus (PDA)

A *ductus arteriosus* that has remained open after birth.

Periventricular leukomalacia (PVL)

Softening of the brain near the fluid spaces (ventricles).

Phototherapy

Blue or white lights placed over the baby's bed to help break down extra bilirubin in the blood.

Pneumonia

An infection in the lung.

Pneumothorax

Air trapped inside the chest between the chest wall and the lung, causing the lung to collapse.

POCUS

Point of care ultrasound. Used for quick diagnosis of conditions of the lung and abdomen.

Premature formulas

Special formulas designed to meet the needs of premature babies.

Prolacta

A human derived milk fortifier that comes as a liquid.

Premature Infant (Preemie)

A baby born more than 3 weeks before the due date. Also called "preterm" or "early born". Most of the time infants are referred to by their birthweight, and the classifications are:

Low Birthweight: Under 5 pounds or 2.5 kg

Very Low

Birthweight: Under 3 pounds or 1.5 kg.

Extremely Low

Birthweight: Under 2.5 pounds or 1.0 kg.

Red blood cells

Cells in the blood that pick-up oxygen from the lungs and carry it to all the tissues of the body.

Respiratory distress syndrome (RDS)

A lung disease partly caused by not having enough *surfactant* in the lungs to keep the air sacs (*alveoli*) open to allow air to move in and out.

Retractions

Pulling in of the ribs and center of the chest with each breath. They happen when a person is working hard to breathe.

Retina

The inner lining of the eye.

Retinopathy of prematurity (ROP)

Abnormal growth of blood vessels in the baby's eye.

Rooting

Head and mouth movements made by a baby searching for a nipple to suck on. The baby makes small quick side-to-side movements of their head with an open mouth.

Sepsis

Infection.

Septic work-up

A series of tests looking for germs (bacteria or viruses) in the blood, urine, spinal fluid and lungs.

Seizures

A brief period of too much nerve activity. The body tenses up, and the baby may twitch or lose consciousness for a few moments.

Surfactant

A slippery substance in the lungs which spreads like a film over the air sacs (*alveoli*) to keep them open so that air can move in and out.



Temperature probe

A coated wire taped to the baby's skin to measure the temperature. It makes sure the heater keeps the baby warmed at the same temperature all the time.

tnECHO

An ultrasound study of the heart looking mainly at function rather than structure.

Total parenteral nutrition (TPN)

Fluid containing sugar, vitamins, minerals, protein and fat given *IV* to provide the baby with nutrition.

Transfusion

Giving fluid such as blood into a vein through an *IV*.

Ultrasound

A test that uses sound waves to make a picture of structures inside the body.

Umbilical artery or vein catheter (UAC or UVC)

A small tubing placed in the baby's artery or vein in the belly button (*umbilicus*), used to give fluids, medicines, nutrition, and to take blood samples.

Umbilical cord

The cord connecting the baby to the mother's placenta before birth.

Umbilical hernia

A hernia in the area of the umbilical cord or belly button.

Umbilicus

The belly button.

Urinary tract infection (UTI)

Infection in the kidney, bladder or other structures urine passes through.

Ventilator

A breathing machine that gives air and oxygen into the baby's lungs.

Ventricles

In the brain, they are the normal fluid spaces. In the heart, they are the two lower chambers.

Ventricular-peritoneal (VP) shunt

A tube placed into the ventricle of the brain, connected to a tubing that drains extra fluid from the ventricles into the baby's tummy.

White blood cells

Cells in the blood that help the body fight infection.

Next Review: September 2025