



## Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Syndrome (NOWS) in Newborn Babies

### What is Neonatal Opioid Withdrawal Syndrome (NOWS)?

This syndrome can also be commonly referred to as “Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS)”.

Babies show certain behaviours or “symptoms” when they withdraw from substances or drugs that their mothers took while pregnant. This called Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome (NAS).

The word “substance” is often used to describe non-medicines such as alcohol or inhalants, and street drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, crack, crystal meth and heroin.

Alcohol, substances and most drugs that a mother takes during pregnancy are passed to her baby. The baby’s body gets used to the drug or substance. After birth, when the substance is no longer there, the baby may show signs of withdrawal.

Some substances are more likely to cause withdrawal than others. This depends on the substance, the amount and how often the mother was taking it. This is true whether a mother is taking prescribed drugs or drugs or substances from someone else.

Sometimes mothers need to take drugs while they are pregnant to manage pain or treat illness. These drugs can include methadone, pain medications or anti-depressant medicines (such as Prozac, Paxil, Effexor, Zoloft). It is important to take these prescribed drugs during pregnancy and treat the baby for NAS after birth. This is because the mother’s depression or untreated addiction is worse for the baby than the effect of the drug. Talk to your Medical Team if you have questions about drugs given to you at any time.

Drugs that are likely to cause withdrawal include narcotics for pain such as oxycontin, Tylenol 3 (T3s), morphine and methadone. Withdrawal can also be caused by antidepressants. NAS can also be caused by alcohol, caffeine and cigarettes. Cocaine, crack and other street drugs can damage the baby’s growing brain and cause symptoms at birth or later. It is important to tell your Medical Team what drugs or substances you are taking.

It is never too late to ask for help if you have been using drugs or alcohol. Mothers may be asked many times about drugs or substances during pregnancy. Some women fear they will be judged as unfit to care for their baby if they say they used drugs or substances during pregnancy. Open answers from you makes sure the right tests and treatments are done to keep you and the baby safe and healthy. The entire Medical Team are available to support all mothers. The Team works together with you to keep you and your baby healthy. Talk to whomever you feel most comfortable with.

### What is meant by scoring?

The signs of NAS are not clear-cut. This means while some of the baby’s behaviours could be from NAS they could also be for other reasons. Babies who show signs of NAS need to be checked out by a Health Care Provider and may need other tests.

A scoring system is used to keep track of the NAS symptoms. This is important to plan treatment, give the right care and plan for discharge.

Staff use a form which lists the NAS symptoms. A high score means more severe symptoms. Often the scores are low at first and increase over the next few days after birth.



Staff use the scores, the mother's history and the baby's examination and tests to decide if the baby has NAS.

Some prescription medications can cause very high scores, and some street drugs can cause no symptoms. Just because a baby is being scored, or has high scores, does not mean that an infant has NAS, or which drugs or substances, if any, are causing the baby's behaviour.

### How do we treat NAS?

The first step in treating NAS is to keep the baby calm. This includes quiet surroundings, swaddling or holding the baby, and small frequent feedings. Some babies require medication to help them stay calm, until they recover from the NAS.

While the drug or substance clears the baby's body, NAS gets worse and then slowly gets better. This may take 3 to 5 days or several weeks, depending on the baby and the substance.

### What about breastfeeding?

Breastfeeding is usually safe when babies are withdrawing from prescribed drugs (such as methadone, antidepressants or pain medications). The small amount of drug that passes into the breast milk may also help the baby to wean slowly from the drug. Breastfeeding and skin to skin contact also help to calm the baby. Your Nurse is a great source of help for breastfeeding. We also have breastfeeding specialists, called Lactation Consultants, to help out if needed.

Mothers who drink alcohol, use other substances or take street drugs should talk to a member of the Medical Team before breastfeeding.

If you have any more questions, or want more information, we are all here to help.

#### **If you have questions call:**

- Your health care provider.
- The Public Health Nurse or Nursing Station.
- Health Links – Info Santé  
24 hours a day at 204-788-8200  
or toll free 1-888-315-9257.

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