

Necrotizing Enterocolitis

What is necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)?

Necrotizing enterocolitis is an inflammation and infection in the intestines, causing destruction of part of the bowel. NEC may involve only the innermost lining or the entire thickness of the bowel and variable amounts of the bowel.

Why do premature babies get NEC?

Premature infants have immature and fragile bowels. They are sensitive to changes in blood flow and to infection. We often do not know why an individual baby develops NEC.

Did my breast milk cause NEC?

No, breast milk neither causes NEC nor prevents a baby from developing it. However, babies fed fresh breast milk get NEC less often.

Is NEC serious?

Yes, baby's can lose some of their bowel from it. Some babies die of NEC. For this reason doctors may start treatment on simply the suspicion that your baby might be developing symptoms of NEC. This suspicion is sometimes referred to as "rule out NEC" or "possible NEC".

How will my baby act if s/he has NEC?

Your baby may show any or all of the following:

- general signs of being "sick": less active, more apnea, increased respiratory problems, difficulty keeping his/her body temperature normal
- poor tolerance to feedings, vomiting or not putting through the milk placed in the stomach (called aspirates or residuals). These aspirates may be greenish in color.
- increased size of tummy
- redness or abnormal color to the tummy
- blood in the stool (bowel movement)

What can be done for it?

If your baby's doctor thinks that s/he might be developing NEC any or all of the following might be done.

- All regular feedings stopped. This is called NPO. The baby will have an IV started so s/he can be given fluids by vein.
- A tube placed into the stomach either from the mouth or nose. The tube removes air and fluids from the baby's stomach and intestine.
- X-rays of the tummy
- A sample of the blood sent to the laboratory to see if it contains bacteria
- Antibiotics started
- More frequent blood tests to look for signs of infection and imbalances in the blood components (sodium, potassium, pH, etc).

What happens if part of my baby's intestine dies?

If only the innermost lining of bowel dies, the body can slowly regrow it. If the entire thickness of a piece of the bowel dies, the baby may need surgery to remove that piece of the bowel. The end of the bowel above the removed segment may be brought to the surface of the skin (called ostomy). At some later time, after the baby has recovered and grown much bigger, the two ends of the bowel can be sewn back together again. At times, the intestine can 'rupture', or develop a hole, that causes stool to go into the abdominal

cavity. This is a very serious condition, and causes peritonitis, or inflammation of the abdominal cavity. This would call for surgery as well.

Are there any long-term problems from NEC?

Most babies who recover from NEC do not have further problems; however, future problems are possible. These include: scarring and narrowing of the bowel causing "obstruction" or blockage of the bowel; and "malabsorption" or inability of the bowel to absorb nutrients normally.