



Follow-up assessments of your preterm baby |

(An article for parents)

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Babies born premature or before 37 weeks of pregnancy, is a reality and commonly found in South Africa. According to The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2004) premature birth accounts to 14.6% of births and in the public sector even as high as 25%, which adds up to a shocking 84 000 births per year in South Africa (Mongale, 2012). This translates to about one in ten babies born premature.

Your vulnerable baby has been cared for by highly specialized healthcare professionals in the hospital, but when you are holding your tiny little baby, safely in your arms, ready to be discharged and go home, mixed emotions may be setting in and you can feel both exited and scared at the same time. Your needs could include a need for information, concerns about support for you as a parent, the type of professional support you will need, questions about your ability to care for this baby whether you have sufficient finances and how you can make things as normal as possible (Stronkhorst, 2012:108).

The implications of being born too soon extend beyond the time when your baby has been hospitalized, it may be evident throughout life (Howson et al., 2012:13). The risk factors associated with preterm birth includes the possibility of cerebral palsy, intellectual impairment, chronic lung diseases and vision and hearing loss (Pandit et al., 2012:218). The good news is that follow-up assessments can ensure continuity of care, early identification and early management of specific problems, reviewing the baby's development and liaising with appropriate therapist if needed (Dorling & Field, 2006:151).

There are certain needs that can be addressed during a follow-up session, and your clinic sister who is trained in premature infant development and assessment, should be able to assist you in this matter. The following aspects can be a guide as to which needs have to be assessed in a follow-up assessment (Blackwell-Sachs & Blackburn, 2010:48):

- The presence and use of a home care plan and recommendations to ensure a good transition from hospital to home
- Parental specific educational needs
 - Information regarding stress cues and handling with positive touch
 - Sleep and wake patterns and risks associated with sleep such as sudden infant death syndrome
 - When to start immunizations and what to expect



- The importance of growth assessment, using a proper preterm infant growth chart
- Hearing and vision assessment
- Information on specific assessments to be performed by other healthcare professionals
- Gastrointestinal assessment and support
- Feeding behavior and problems associated with feeding
- Assessment on development to ensure early developmental care

Detecting and referring early is one of the most important aspects of the assessment (Kumar et al., 2008:3). The assessment and treatment planned includes the multi-disciplinary team and if the team is working well together and proper assessments are done, the outcome of health and development will be better. The clinic sister trained in prematurity infant development and assessment, acts as the voice in the multi-disciplinary team and the importance of their role cannot be excluded.

The first evaluation, determining weight gain, should be done three days after your baby is discharge from hospital at a facility that specializes in preterm baby follow-up visits (Lubbe, 2008:269). The role of your pediatrician is to check your baby's overall medical condition. However for support on feeding, a crying or fussy baby and general adaptation to the home environment you may choose to consult a healthcare professional specifically trained and experienced in preterm infant development and care (Lubbe, 2008:269). These professionals are trained to deal with mentioned questions and to give support or refer if needed.

Your preemie is ready to become a child now, embrace it and grow with them, enjoy every milestone and every moment, knowing that you receive the correct treatment, information and support.



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