

# NICU Family News



The NICU Family News is produced by the Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) Family Advisory Council. It is designed provide you with information we hope you will find useful during and after your family's NICU stay.

## DID YOU KNOW...

...doing skin to skin care with your baby in the NICU has a number of benefits for baby and is one of the most comforting things a parent can do for their child. No NICU equipment can substitute for doing skin to skin care. Talk to your nurse to see if your baby is able to do skin to skin with you (for babies born less than 32 weeks gestation, you will have to wait until after their first three days of life).

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## Coping in the NICU and Beyond

Having a baby or babies in the NICU is scary right? Well yes, but it can also feel downright terrifying for some! NICU parents often watch their babies struggle to eat, to grow, and often just to breathe. It's no wonder a number of recent online articles and medical journal articles reveal higher rates of depression, anxiety and even post-traumatic stress disorder in NICU moms and yes, in dads too. They also show these rates to be higher for up to a year after NICU babies come home. These parents are often juggling numerous stressors (e.g. being out of work, costs of hospitalization or spending extended time at the hospital) on top of worrying about their baby and their future.

Almost all NICU parents experience some grief which can be supported and talked about and generally lessens once they can sleep better, eat better, see the baby improving, and are hopeful about taking them home. Sometimes though it does not improve, and indeed it worsens and turns into clinical depression and/or anxiety which they feel they cannot control and may need the help of medication and/or psychotherapy. The most important thing you can do as a parent is to be open and honest with medical providers and friends/family about how you feel. No one can help you get the services you need unless you tell them. Often for women it is their OB/GYN that needs to hear about their mood at follow up visits. Please don't assume because you feel like you "seem sad" when visiting the NICU that will translate to your doctor knowing how you are feeling. You must tell them what you are thinking and feeling beyond just the initial terrified feelings we mentioned earlier. If they are not listening or do not seem to think your low mood as a NICU parent is as serious as you do, check in with your regular doctor as well.

Graduate NICU parents from CBMC have also shared these emotional tips, based on their experiences, to try to help you get through "the NICU roller-coaster ride:"

- If possible, try to stay positive and think about getting ready to take your baby home one day.
- If it hurts, don't keep it to yourself. If you are sad or having other powerful emotions find a good listener and tell them how you feel. This may be a spouse, friend, parent, religious leader, or a NICU buddy - who may have felt the same feelings you are.
- Remind yourself how good the care is that your baby is getting at CBMC and that the doctors and nurses are doing everything they can in an effort to have your baby go home as healthy as possible one day!

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## Let's Get to Know: Marissa Rodriguez, MSN, RN, CCRN NICU Quality and Research Coordinator

### How long have you been at CBMC and a nurse?

I have been working in the NICU at CBMC since August 2023. I have been a nurse for 11 years in different settings. I worked with adults for 5 years in a long-term acute care hospital and adult trauma intensive Care and then started working in a NICU in 2017.

### Where did you do your nursing education/training?

I went to Middlesex County College in Edison for my Associate's Degree in Nursing. When completing the program, I was able to sit for and pass my NCLEX board exam. I began working in the field and started a bachelor's program at New Jersey City University, which I completed with honors. After a couple years in the NICU, I sat for my Critical Care Registered Nursing exam to become professionally certified as a NICU nurse. My passion for being a NICU nurse led me to join many different committees and councils in the NICU in the last hospital where I worked. I chaired the NICU council and worked on projects to improve patient care. My interest grew in making a difference on a larger scale to improve patient outcomes and quality. I earned a Master's of Science in Nursing at Ramapo College in 2022.

### Please describe what your role is here in our NICU?

As the NICU Quality and Research Coordinator I look at patient data and outcomes to improve patient care. I also lead the NICU Leadership Council and attend NICU committees. Recently, I have also helped staff with EPIC, CBMC's new electronic medical record.

### How'd you know you wanted to be a nurse/NICU nurse?

When I was a junior in high school, I was not sure what I wanted to focus on in college. It seemed like such a hard question to answer so I tried different clubs and activities to learn more about what interested me. I joined a "home ec" club in school, where they were making hats and blankets for NICU babies at the local hospital. I liked making the clothes and being able to meet new people in the club, but the real big moment was when a few of us took a field trip to drop off the clothes we made. We went to the NICU at the local hospital, we talked with the nurses and were able to see their unit.



I was so intrigued by how these nurses helped these little babies grow. I came home from school that day, telling my mom "I want to be a NICU nurse." We did not have any nurses in my family and we had no idea how you even began a program but started the research that day on how I could focus on that in college.

When I first started working as a nurse, it was a little difficult to get into the NICU and I needed more experience as a nurse. I started working with adults and truly loved being able to help such critical patients. I knew I still had a love for NICU, and decided it was time for me to take a chance to see if I really would love what I went into this career for. I am so happy I made the switch to NICU from adults, but I am so thankful for all of my experiences, nurses, and patients that I learned so much from.

### What do you like the most about working in the NICU?

I truly feel fortunate to have this career in the NICU. NICU is one of the few departments that you are able to care for your patients AND see them grow. Some patients are with us for a long time, and being able to get to know the families while also caring for their baby is something I appreciate. Seeing some of the first preemies I took care of doing so well, years after I took care of them at a NICU walk was one of the most impactful moments in my career.

### Do you have any suggestions or advice for NICU families in general?

My advice to remember to take care of you too. The NICU stay is at times overwhelming and stressful and I think it is important to remember it is okay to take time away from the bedside to heal when you need to. Taking the time to rest and reset will help you when you are at the bedside with your baby.

## Our Miracle Is Named Lorenzo

Our son Lorenzo was born at 23 weeks gestation in November of 2022. He weighed 1 pound, 7.5 ounces and was about the length of a water bottle. The day he was born will always be one of the scariest and most traumatic times of our lives. Seeing sweet little Lorenzo in the incubator with all kinds of tubes and monitors was unreal. The only thought we had at the time was how could this happen to us? It felt like doom and gloom everyday thinking that our little baby was not going to make it, but then he got stronger day by day, and then days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months.

Being a NICU parent was no small feat. It was difficult having to ask to touch our baby, watch him get necessary medical care without knowing what was really going on, and learning medical terms that an everyday person would never need in their vocabulary, but we got through it. You have to because you have this little baby that you are fighting for.

Three weeks after Lorenzo was born, he weighed just shy of 2 pounds. That's when we got to do kangaroo care (also called skin to skin) and it was the most magical moment. From that moment on, we changed every diaper, we did every swab of milk and every temperature check. Being a NICU parent is different, but it doesn't make you any less of a parent. You still know what is best for your baby, and you are still losing sleep even if it's not how you thought you were going to lose sleep. Everyone says that the NICU can be a rollercoaster ride, and for us it was to some degree but we did not experience as many dips as one may think a 23-weeker may have. We were in the hospital all day, every day. We ate breakfast, lunch and dinner there, learned all the nurses' names, watched as babies were brought in and out of the NICU, and watched other parents celebrate as their babies went home. Our day to celebrate came 109 days after Lorenzo was born and we took home a healthy 10 pound baby before his due date!

Today, Lorenzo is one year old! He has such a big personality and is the silliest baby you could meet. He is now close to 25 pound and is so tall. He is in the 20<sup>th</sup> percentile for his actual age. He does early intervention physical therapy once a week and is meeting all of his corrected age milestones.

NICU parents, I know this isn't how we expected everything to turn out but know that your baby is strong, resilient, and has the heart of a lion. You have done everything you possibly could to get to this point and you are certainly not alone. We hope that after your baby's NICU stay, you will see changes in yourself and changes in your outlook on life, many for the better. And one day in the near future, we also hope you will look back at your NICU journey in awe that you, your family and your baby overcame so much. We know we do. Miracles happen, they truly do. Our miracle is named Lorenzo and he is a healthy, normal one-year-old ready to take over the world. Stay strong parents!

**Love, Lorenzo's Mom and Dad**



## Important Phone Numbers

**NICU:** 973-322-5300

**NICU Clinical Director:**  
973-322-8938

**NICU Social Worker:** 973-322-5503

**NICU Case Managers:**  
973-322-5909/973-322-2678

**Birth Certificate Office:**  
973-322-5327

**Lactation Consultants:**  
973-322-9088

**NICU High Risk Infant Follow-Up Program:** 973-322-2631

## Want to Help the Family Advisory Council?

The FAC is made up of graduate parents dedicated to helping new NICU parents. We meet monthly to discuss ways to do this. We're always looking for recent graduate parents to share their experiences and ideas to make our NICU the best it can be. We welcome your ideas and participation.

**Contact: Hayley Hirschmann**  
FAC Coordinator  
Hayley.Hirschmann@rwjbh.org  
973-322-9486

## Coping in the NICU and Beyond (con't from page 1)

**Graduate parents, who are where you are now, also had these suggestions for trying to balance NICU life with outside life:**

- Try to get as much rest as possible. This is a MUST, especially for moms recovering from delivery and pumping breastmilk or breastfeeding. Don't be opposed to a quick nap sitting at your baby's bedside, even if you were never much of a nap person before.
- Eat nutritious meals. You may not feel much like grocery shopping or cooking while your baby is in the NICU but eating well is an important part of the recovery process. Also, you will need to take in about 500 calories more a day than usual for each baby you are pumping or nursing for. Eat more smaller meals if you don't have a big appetite and do take friends/families up on offers to cook for you if you are lucky enough to get them.
- Make sure to drink enough fluids. If you are pumping or nursing you should be drinking at least 6-8 glasses of water or other non-caffeinated drinks each day.
- Accept practical offers of help. Sometimes friends and family offer to help but don't know how. Asking them to help with things like meals, child care or household chores could create more time for you and your spouse to focus on your NICU baby, your other children and each other.
- Limit the number of phone calls and/or visits you accept. It can be exhausting to retell your baby's status/progress each day to many people. Consider using email or text groups to reach out to many people at once. Or you can choose one person to update and then have them update others you want to have information.
- Try to make the most of the time when you are here in the NICU. If you are on a tight schedule with time (due to work and/or needs of other children at home...) try to spend time at the NICU when your baby is awake and alert. Whenever you see your baby's nurses let them know you want to try to be there when your baby is awake and they can usually tell you when they will be fed or bathed so you can be there too.
- Above all, be patient with your baby and with yourself. You and your baby will heal in your own way and your own time. A common feeling NICU parents experience is guilt but remember "feeling" and "being" are two different things. Feeling guilty or feeling like a failure is not the same as being guilty or being a failure. Try to focus on the idea that you are doing the best you can and your best can get better with patience, practice, self-care, and professional help if needed.

## 23rd Annual Miracle Walk

The 23rd Annual Miracle Walk to benefit the Cooperman Barnabas Medical Center NICU was held on Sunday, October 8, 2023, in beautiful Verona Park. This was the second walk back in the park since the pandemic and we had such a GREAT turnout! The walk was a big success and raised almost \$235,000 for the NICU.

We hope to see you at the 24<sup>th</sup> Annual Miracle Walk in October.



**To make a donation or for more information visit: [miraclegwalk.com](http://miraclegwalk.com) or [facebook.com/miraclegwalk](https://facebook.com/miraclegwalk)**