



Information for Parents

Probiotics, Breast Milk, and Necrotizing Enterocolitis

What is necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC)?

Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) is a common and devastating intestinal condition that mostly occurs in premature infants, usually between 2 and 8 weeks of age. NEC can be life-threatening. NEC is caused from inflammation of the intestine. Some babies need surgery because of NEC.

How can we prevent NEC?

Breast milk from the baby's mother offers the most protection against NEC for very premature and medically fragile infants. When mothers are unable to provide their own milk, pasteurized donor milk provides more protection than formula against NEC. There is also good evidence that giving premature babies probiotics reduces their risk of NEC and increases their chance of survival. Neither human milk nor probiotics can eliminate the risks of NEC.

What are probiotics?

Probiotics are healthy, live bacteria that have benefits in the intestine and on the immune system. Probiotics are like bacteria found in yogurt. Probiotics are more effective when premature babies also receive breast milk.

Are there any risks of getting probiotics?

There are risks and benefits to every treatment. The benefits of probiotics include maintenance of healthy bacteria in the intestine. This is believed to help prevent NEC. In rare situations, probiotic bacteria can get into the blood and cause infections. If babies develop an infection in the blood with the probiotic bacteria, they are given an antibiotic to kill the probiotic bacteria. When this has happened, the infections have been responsive to treatment. Based on the literature, it appears that the benefits of probiotic administration outweigh the potential risks.

If you have questions about breast milk, probiotics, or your baby's health status, please ask your baby's healthcare provider.

Probiotics are not currently approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) nor recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) for the prevention of necrotizing enterocolitis or other neonatal diseases. This educational resource aims to share information and empower NICU parents.

Creating a World without NEC



www.NECsociety.org