

Probiotics & Necrotizing Enterocolitis

What Parents Should Know

What is necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC?)

Necrotizing enterocolitis (NEC) is a life-threatening intestinal condition that mostly occurs in premature infants, usually between 2 and 8 weeks of age. Full-term infants with health complications such as congenital heart disease are also at an increased risk of NEC. NEC causes an inflammatory process that can lead to intestinal tissue damage and even death. Many infants with NEC require surgery to remove diseased bowel. NEC survivors may experience long-term problems with cognition, behavior, muscle function, and poor intestinal function.

How can we reduce the risks of NEC?

- Breast milk from the baby's mother/parent is the most important way to help reduce NEC risk.
- If mother's milk is unavailable, pasteurized donor milk is the next best option for premature infants.
- Giving probiotics to premature babies, along with breast milk, may reduce the risk of NEC.

What are probiotics?

Probiotics are live microorganisms that, when given in adequate amounts, provide a health benefit to the individual. Probiotics are identified by a genus, species and strain designation, and different strains of even the same species may have different effects. Probiotics support the development of your baby's gut microbiome, which is an important means to maintain gut health.

What do studies show about probiotics and NEC?

When given to premature infants, certain probiotics may reduce the risk of NEC, infections and even death. There is no data or regulatory approval to support the superiority of a single probiotic strain or product.



How can parents with an infant at risk of NEC advocate for their child?

- Ask your child's physician about the NICU's policy and why they do or do not use probiotics.
- You are an important part of your baby's care team. Ask questions and share your thoughts.
- Learn more about necrotizing enterocolitis at NECsociety.org

What are the risks of giving my baby probiotics?

There are risks and benefits to every treatment. Based on scientific studies, it appears that the benefits of probiotic administration may outweigh potential risks. Potential risks include bacterial infection (sepsis), contamination of product, lack of ingredient/strain label regulation, and cross-colonization among infants not receiving probiotics. However, reported adverse events associated with probiotics use for NEC reduction are rare. Talk to your baby's care team about all potential benefits and risks.

