

NECROTISING ENTEROCOLITIS

What is necrotising enterocolitis (NEC)?

This is a condition that affects the gastrointestinal tract (small and/or large intestine), usually of premature infants. It causes inflammation and infection of the bowel, which can make premature infants very sick.

What causes NEC?

We are uncertain as to what causes NEC, but many factors appear to be involved. The most significant factors are preterm birth and low birth weight.

Can we prevent NEC?

There is no treatment available that will prevent NEC. If mothers have been given steroids (dexamethasone/celestone) more than 24 hours before delivery it reduces the risk of NEC. If babies are fed expressed breast milk instead of formula, there is a reduced risk of NEC.

How do we treat NEC?

When a baby is suspected of having NEC the feeds are stopped. The baby is commenced on intravenous nutrition and antibiotics. Abdominal x-rays will be performed on a regular basis.

Your baby may need other support such as respiratory support with a ventilator, transfusion of blood or components of blood, and drugs for blood pressure support. A paediatric surgeon will be asked to review your baby at the onset of the illness as up to 45% of babies may require an operation. The inflamed bowel heals over 1-2 weeks.

What are the complications of NEC?

Due to the inflammation and infection the bowel may perforate (a hole in the bowel wall) allowing gas and bowel contents into the abdominal cavity. If this occurs an operation will most likely be required. This may be performed in the nursery or the operating theatres. Small to large portions of the bowel may be severely damaged and need to be removed. A second operation may be required later to rejoin segments of bowel.

A narrowing (stricture) of the bowel may occur as a result of the inflammation/infection. This occurs in up to 25-30% of cases. This may improve on its own or may require an operation to remove the affected portion of bowel. If a large amount of bowel is removed, absorption of milk may be difficult and intravenous feeding may be required for some weeks, and rarely months.

Do babies die from NEC?

70% of babies will survive NEC, but unfortunately some will die. The babies at most risk are the ones with severe damage, very small babies and those that have needed surgery.

If you have any further questions please ask the medical and nursing staff.