

To the friends and family of a *Preemie*,

Well, I'm here! I am most likely much earlier than expected, and I've probably given everyone quite a scare, especially my parents. I am now in a place called the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, but you can call it the NICU for short. Although I may be very tiny, please don't be afraid. The NICU team of nurses, doctors, and therapists are all there to help me to grow big and strong. We are all going through something that was very unexpected, and I'd like to give you some tips on how to best support my amazing parents.

First, celebrate me! Being itty-bitty and a few days, weeks, or months early, is still something to celebrate and will shine a positive light on this nerve-wracking time. Please make sure to ask my parents before sharing any photos or news; let them process and do this in their own time.

Since this might be my parents first go-around in the NICU, please be patient with them. I am not like other newborns, and they have so much to learn. My parents might not answer your calls or texts right away because they are extra tired and emotional after visiting me at the hospital. They have a lot of new information to digest that comes with having a preemie. Keep reaching out. I promise that they will love to see messages from you throughout their hard day. Emotional support and empathy are what they need right now. Avoid asking questions that may worry them more, like if you can visit, or when I'm coming home. I'm sure as soon as they know that I will be coming home they will shout it from the rooftops! There is also a ton of research you can do on premature babies to help answer your questions.

My parents are focused on me and my well-being, which means they are probably slacking on some self-care of their own. It will be hard getting a straight answer out of my parents about how you can best help them. They probably will just say they are "fine" when you ask how they are, and "nothing" when you ask what they need. I suggest just doing nice things for them instead of asking. Starting a meal train, buying gift cards for restaurants and gas near the hospital, and gifting items from their baby registry is a great place to start. If I have older siblings, help them with childcare by taking them off their hands for a fun day out! Not only will it help out my parents, but my siblings could use a good dose of happy right about now!

As for visitation, there are a lot of things you need to be mindful of if you are able to come see me. First off, please make sure that you are freshly showered, wearing clean clothes, and wear a mask and gloves if you are asked. My sensory system is still learning, so be careful not to overstimulate me with noise or too much touching. Please, never wake me if I am sleeping! I need all the energy I can get to grow big and strong to go home. My lungs are also very sensitive right now, and cannot handle smells such as perfume, cologne, or smoke. If you feel even the slightest bit sick, or have been in close contact with someone who is sick, please wait to visit me as my immune system is extremely weak, and the smallest germ could give me a huge setback. Even if you are healthy, visitation may be limited depending on the time of year I was born.

Bummer, right? It is also important that you remember that ALL OF THESE VISITATION RULES WILL STILL APPLY EVEN WHEN I COME HOME. That's right, NICU parents and their preemies have been doing this quarantine thing before it was the "in thing" to do! Please be respectful of my parents' wishes, as they are working hard to get me home happy and healthy and want it to stay that way.

Everyday in the NICU will bring struggles and joys for me and my parents. We are so lucky to have you be apart of our support system. We love and appreciate you very much!

I can't wait to meet you,

Your Tiny and Mighty Fighter