

Understanding Apnoea of Prematurity



What is apnoea of prematurity?

With **apnoea** [ap-knee-uh], breathing stops temporarily and then returns to normal. Apnoea of prematurity refers to short periods of time when a premature baby stops breathing.

What causes apnoea of prematurity?

There are two main causes of apnoea of prematurity:

- Brain development may not be complete
- The muscles needed for breathing may be weak

Other problems may contribute to apnoea, including:

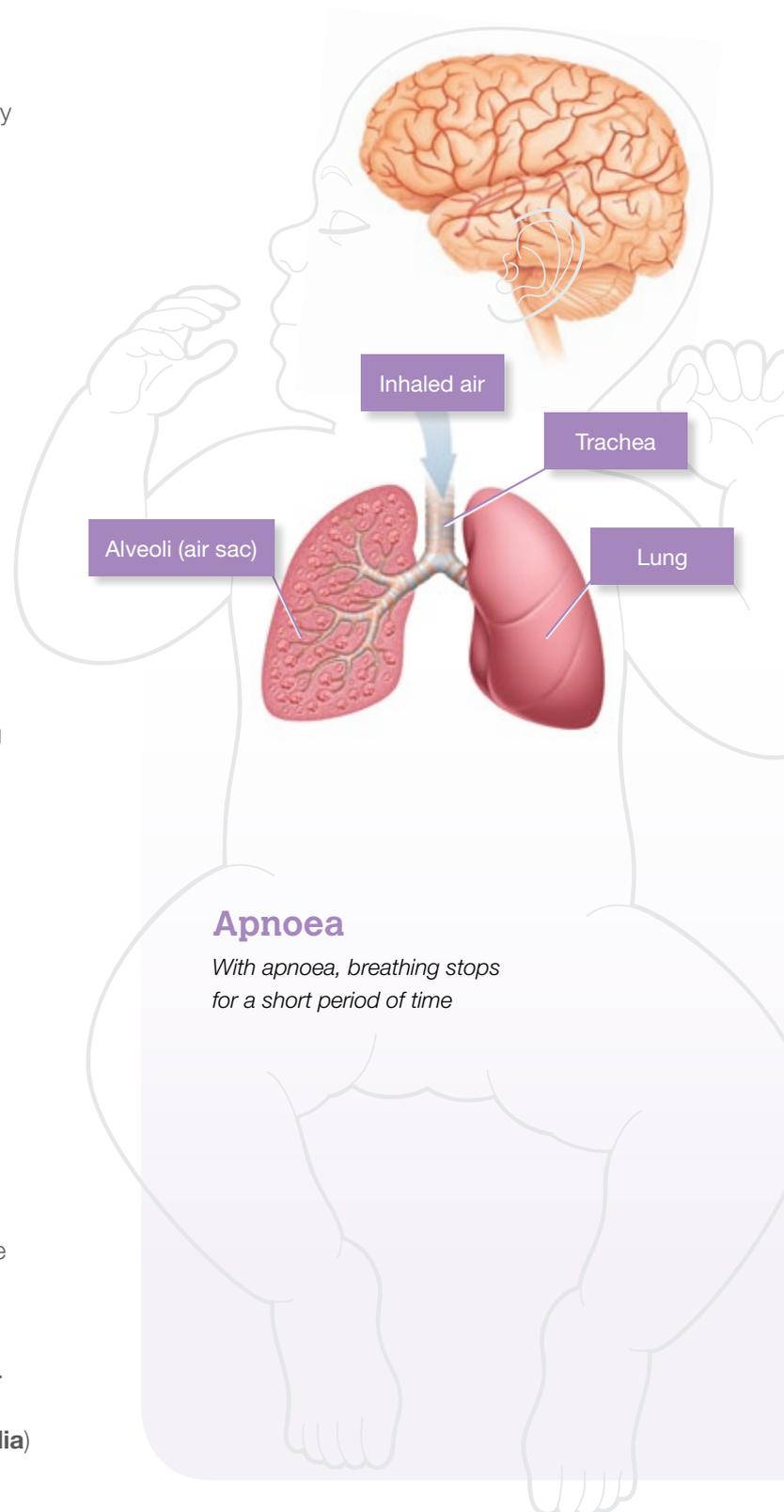
- Low red blood cell count (**anaemia**)
- Feeding problems
 - **Reflux** (stomach contents back up into throat)
 - Lack of co-ordination (baby has trouble breathing while eating)
- Heart or lung problems
- Infection
- Low blood sugar
- Baby is not getting enough oxygen while breathing
- Overstimulation
- Problems keeping body temperature constant

How will I know if my baby has apnoea of prematurity?

Apnoea is common in premature babies. While in the NICU, the baby is hooked up to monitors that measure breathing and heart rate. The healthcare team will tell you if your baby has periods of apnoea.

It is important to manage apnoea while it is happening. Otherwise, the baby may not get enough oxygen.

The baby's heart rate may also slow down (**bradycardia**) during apnoea.



Treating Apnoea of Prematurity

What treatment will my baby receive?

Treatment depends on how often the baby stops breathing and for how long.

- In general, healthy babies with a few periods of apnoea per day often do not need treatment
 - Gently touching the baby during periods of apnoea can help get breathing back to normal
 - Changing the baby's position or feeding the baby more slowly may also help
- Babies who have more frequent apnoea may need treatment to help them breathe
 - Medicines like caffeine may be used
 - Extra oxygen or air may be delivered using a small tube in the nose
 - In a few cases, the healthcare team may help the baby's breathing by using a mask and a bag or a breathing machine. This machine might be a **CPAP** or a **ventilator**

What will happen next?

Most cases of apnoea of prematurity go away on their own as the baby matures. All babies have irregular breathing, it is normal for them to stop breathing for a few seconds when they are asleep. If apnoea symptoms recur it is due to some other problem and should be discussed with your baby's doctor. Each baby is different. Talk to your baby's healthcare team. They can answer any questions you have about your baby.

Glossary

Alveoli

tiny sacs in the lungs that move oxygen from the air into the blood

Anaemia

low red blood cell count

Apnoea

breathing stops for a short period of time

Bradycardia

decreased heart rate

CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure)

a treatment that uses mild pressurised air to keep the lungs open

Reflux

stomach contents back into throat

Saturation

the amount of oxygen in the blood. This is expressed as a percentage of the total amount of oxygen that the blood can hold

Trachea

windpipe

Ventilator

a machine that helps your baby breathe by pushing air in and out of the lungs

**Ask the healthcare team
when you have questions
– they are there to help.**

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