

Meconium Aspiration

What is meconium aspiration?

Meconium is the first stool (bowel movement, poop) that a baby has. Aspiration is inhaling (breathing in) a substance into the lungs. Sometimes a baby may have a bowel movement while still inside of the mother. That bowel movement mixes in with the amniotic fluid that surrounds the baby. The amniotic fluid/meconium mixture gets into the baby's nose and mouth, and sometimes, at delivery, the baby can inhale this mixture into his/her lungs.

Meconium is a thick, tarry, sticky substance. If your baby inhales it, it can hurt your baby's lungs. It may take a while for the meconium to get out of the lungs. Your baby may become *very* sick from this.

There is usually some reason—some stress on the infant—that causes him/her to have a bowel movement prior to delivery.

Every effort is made to suction out the nose and mouth of the baby before the body is born. Sometimes there needs to be a trained specialist at the delivery who can place a tube into the trachea (windpipe, breathing tube) of the baby to suck out the meconium. Sometimes, even with all of these attempts to remove the meconium, some still stays in the lungs. That's when babies can get into trouble.

How will the doctor know if my baby inhaled the meconium?

There is always a chance that a baby will inhale the amniotic fluid. Every attempt is made to not allow the baby to inhale it. If the doctor places a tube into the baby's windpipe, he/she can see if there is any meconium in the trachea (the meconium will be a greenish color). Chest x-rays and blood gases may help to confirm that the inhalation/aspiration did occur.

What happens if my baby inhales this?

Sometimes the babies do just fine and go to the newborn nursery and thrive. Sometimes the baby may need to go to the NICU and need minimal help (some oxygen, some CPT (chest physiotherapy—using an instrument to tap on the chest or vibrate the chest to loosen materials in the lungs and make it easier for the baby to cough it out), maybe some IV medication (meconium in the lungs may cause an infection in the lungs and the baby may need antibiotics).

Sometimes the baby may become very ill from this and require a lot of help and support.

What do you mean by 'a lot of support'?

Sometimes an infant can become extremely ill and require mechanical ventilation support. Mechanical ventilation is where a breathing tube is placed into the baby's lungs and helps him/her to breathe. This baby cannot handle stress of any kind. He/she needs a quiet environment to heal. We will ask you to talk softly around the baby. We may ask you, as hard as it will be, to not touch your baby. Sometimes, even the gentlest of touches can cause a baby to do worse.

Sometimes just the baby moving by him/herself is enough to cause stress on his lungs and we may need to heavily sedate him and prevent him from moving.

He/she may be on special medicines to support his blood pressure. He/she may have frequent chest x-rays. He/she may be on a special gas that is breathed in called nitric oxide, which helps to dilate the vessels in the lungs and help the baby get more oxygen into the bloodstream.

This type of baby will be *very* sick for several days. Some may even die. Many, however, will slowly show improvement, and eventually return to normal.