

Expecting the Unexpected - the Birth of a Premature Infant

www.preemieinfant.ca

I remember riding roller coasters with my younger sister. She wasn't allowed on them unless I went with her. I hated them. They went way too fast and I really detested the feeling of being out of control. Having a premature baby is very much like taking a roller coaster ride. Things can happen very quickly and as a parent you are certainly not in control.

Our son was a 'preemie'. He was born at 28 weeks gestation and weighed 1000 grams. Unlike most premature births, we knew our baby would be premature by three to four weeks (due to a pre-existing condition I had) but we never expected him to be as premature as he was. Alexander was delivered by an emergency c-section and whisked away by the neonatologist and his expert team to be resuscitated. It took two hours to fully stabilize our tiny baby. I finally got my first look at our son from my bed in the recovery area. He was wheeled by in his isolette on his way to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. The next morning after I was helped from my bed and did the c-section shuffle to the special care nursery I realized just how fragile and tiny our son was.

Alexander was covered from head to toe in equipment. He had monitors, catheters and IV lines attached to his chest, arms and legs. His face was obscured because of the endotracheal tube secured to his face by tape. His eyes, not open, were sunken into their sockets. His skin was transparent. And he was so small. If I put my fingertips touching each other, he barely went from palm to palm of my hands. We remember asking one of his critical care nurses if he would survive. She very gently suggested we wait and see what the next forty-eight hours would bring. It seemed like an eternity before the neonatologist finally said he was cautiously optimistic. But he also warned us that we had a roller coaster ride ahead. We were on a peak now - feeling exhilarated - but there would be plenty of valleys and curves just waiting to provide that sinking feeling in the pit of our stomach.

Much like the feeling you have on a roller coaster as it creeps to the top of one of its peaks - anticipation, fear - we braced ourselves for an inevitable set back in our son's progress. It came. And it came as quickly as the cars on a coaster disappear over a peak and into a valley. Just as our neonatologist had warned us, Alexander developed an infection. For a healthy child or adult it would be nothing. But for a preemie with little or no immune system it was devastating. It took only a couple of hours for our pink, active little son to turn into a grey, limp, very sick baby. The endotracheal tube was re-inserted; he was put on powerful antibiotics. And all we could do was control our fear. It took the better part of a day and a half before the antibiotics took effect, but Alexander responded and we finally had our pink baby back.

We had a number of other small set backs and we agonized when his hearing and vision were checked. Did he have

retinopathy of prematurity? Had his prematurity affected his auditory capabilities? What would the ultrasound reveal about the Grade one intraventricular hemorrhage we knew he had? Will he be normal? Luckily, Alexander is quite normal. He is now a happy, bright seven year-old and heading into Grade Two at school.

It is estimated that every year between 7 and 10% of births are of preemies. Most of these births are not preventable because there are no obvious causes. Approximately 40% of women who are expecting twins or triplets can expect a pre-term birth. There is now a website devoted to Canadian parents of premature infants. It is designed to help parents of pre-term infants understand the roller coaster ride they are on and provide information and support through the 'valleys' in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit, plus share the exhilaration at the end of the ride. Please visit www.preemieinfant.ca.

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