

NEC Signs and Symptoms of NEC – Table for NICU Nurses

Category	What to Look For	Critical Thinking / Why It Matters
Abdominal Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Firmness or tenderness - Discoloration - Visible loops or separation of abdominal wall 	Indicates bowel inflammation, ischemia, or gas trapping—classic early signs of NEC
Output	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Large-volume green (bilious) emesis - Bloody stool 	Suggests bowel injury or obstruction; blood = mucosal injury; bile = possible obstruction or slowed motility
Vital Signs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prolonged capillary refill (>3 seconds) - Tachycardia from pain or dehydration - Low blood pressure - Change in temperature 	Reflects poor perfusion, systemic response to infection, or dehydration; servo detects thermal instability before we do
Respiratory/Metabolic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in A/B/D events - Respiratory acidosis - Metabolic acidosis - Glucose rising then dropping 	Increasing metabolic demand and poor perfusion impact gas exchange and glucose control—classic signs of systemic stress
Neurobehavioral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lethargy - Decreased tone - Poor feeding - Pain cues (cry, facial expression) 	“Not acting right” should never be ignored—neuro changes often accompany early systemic decline
Other Labs/Imaging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Worsening blood gases - Abdominal X-ray: pneumatosis, portal venous gas, free air - Sudden increase in inflammatory markers (CRP, WBC) 	NEC diagnosis confirmed by imaging; labs support systemic infection or inflammation
Communication (SBAR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use objective signs: “Abdomen is firm and dusky, cap refill is 4 sec, baby had bilious emesis” 	Builds clinical credibility and ensures clear, effective escalation to the team
Orders to Anticipate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Abdominal X-ray - Blood cultures, CBC, CRP - Replogle to intermittent suction - NPO + IV fluids - Broad antibiotics 	Be ready to assist and advocate—your awareness of next steps prepares the team and improves outcomes



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