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Checking on baby Zoe

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In the 100 days since her birth, Zoe Koz met all the normal milestones for newborns.

She had her first bath, her first bottle. She wore a Peter Rabbit outfit for Easter. Grandparents, aunts and uncles have all cooed over her crib and felt her tiny, tiny fingers.

But Zoe, who in January became the third-smallest baby born in the United States, has had more than the usual share of baby victories.

In the hushed, dim environment of the neonatal intensive care unit, Zoe's parents have watched their tiny daughter learn to breathe on her own. They ticked off each gram of weight she gained. They cheered when nurses removed her IV.

At their home in Plainfield, Eric and Tammy Koz wallpapered a nursery and assembled a crib for their first child, their parents' first grandchild. And every day they drove to Edward Hospital in Naperville to watch Zoe grow.

"We're ready to get her home and have a normal life," said Zoe's mother, Tammy Koz.

Zoe has a month or longer left in the hospital. But her family is ready to celebrate.

This Sunday, more than 300 friends and family members will gather at the Holiday Inn in Bolingbrook for a fund-raiser with clowns, music, food and a Zoe slide show. The Kozes have insurance to cover her hospital stay but don't know yet whether Zoe will need long-term therapy or other care.

According to doctors, though, Zoe is turning the corner. Her biggest hurdle is learning to suck from a bottle, something she tried for the first time Wednesday, her 100th day.

They have reason to be optimistic. Since she was born Jan. 6, weighing only 10.8 ounces, Zoe has cleared every obstacle before her. She's grown to nearly five times her birth weight and is finally taller than the Barbie doll someone once placed in her crib.

"I think she's had a remarkably smooth course so far," said Dr. Bob Covert, the neonatologist overseeing her care. "She's really sort of plugged along this whole time."

Since her birth Zoe has been watched by speech and physical therapists, respiratory experts, pediatric nutritionists, ophthalmologists, cardiologists, an ear, nose and throat specialist, a pediatric pharmacist, her neonatologist and around-the-clock

nurses.

Tammy, who works from home as a diagnostic test coordinator, sometimes squeezes in a visit before work. Eric comes in the evening after his shift at the Molex warehouse in Bolingbrook.

"I go home, I go to sleep, I go to work, I go to the hospital," Eric Koz said. "That's what we do now."

Despite their desire to have Zoe at home, the Kozes say the last three months have been "a walk in the park" compared to the three weeks that preceded her birth.

When Tammy Koz was 24 weeks pregnant, her doctors told her Zoe could die in the womb. Tammy's placenta did not develop normally because she has lupus, an autoimmune disorder, and Zoe wasn't getting an adequate blood supply.

The Kozes decided to wait as long as possible to give Zoe more time to develop. The wait was agonizing.

"We had to wait three weeks before we even knew she'd be born," Eric Koz said. "That's what the killer part is. So I'll take 1,000 days in the hospital instead of three weeks not knowing what will happen."

"Now there's no doubt in my mind, she'll be healthy, she'll be just a normal kid when she grows up."

Until she grows bigger, Zoe may be at higher risk of infection, Covert said. She'll probably be smaller than other kids. Developmentally, she has a good prognosis, although it is hard to predict long-term effects because so little data exists on babies Zoe's size.

Before they send her home, doctors hope to wean Zoe off supplied oxygen. She also has to learn to coordinate her sucking, swallowing and breathing so she can feed from a bottle.

Now Zoe receives her nutrients from a feeding tube that snakes down her nose into her stomach.

Sometimes she resents the intrusion.

Zoe fusses and scrunches her face when nurses have to suction her nose. She doesn't really like wearing hats, either.

Since she donned her first outfit a couple of weeks ago, Zoe's wardrobe has overtaken the shelf beneath her crib, and now a plastic bin is stuffed with tiny dresses and soft outfits sewn by her great aunt, Donna Shaw of Matteson.

Gayle Anson, another great-aunt who lives in the Southwest suburbs, remembers trying to buy a baby gift the day Zoe was born. She found nothing to fit - even doll

clothes were too large.

"You look at her first picture and you look at her now and it's a miracle," Anson said. "There's no other way to describe it."

Anson organized Sunday's fund-raiser to help the Kozes with medical bills and other expenses. But the event will also serve as a reunion.

Zoe's story, which has drawn widespread media attention, also helped bring together a family that had begun to drift apart, a product of busy lives and lack of anchor after Anson's parents died.

Chalk it up to Zoe's growing list of achievements.

At home in Plainfield, an entire closet is packed with mementos from her first 100 days - newspaper clippings from her first news conference, five photo albums and two years' worth of supplies from loved ones at a baby shower.

Tammy Koz is thinking about Zoe's next step. It's a big one, though: Mother would like to bring daughter home by Mother's Day. But, then again, Tammy notes, "She's surpassed everyone's expectations."

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