

Felecia Coleman knows that her son – who just turned 3 – isn't much like other kids his age. He's smaller than the other toddlers, and he's very timid around them as well. The boy continues to find it difficult to communicate.

"He struggles with his speech," Coleman said, adding that "I know what he's saying."

None of Coleman's doctors had warned the 35-year-old upstate New York woman that her child might face any problems because of the opioid painkillers that she'd become dependent upon after three back surgeries for a herniated disc the year before. In fact, when Coleman was seriously burned late into her pregnancy and hospitalized for two weeks, physicians treating her actually upped her dosage of Purdue Pharma's OxyContin.

Today, Coleman is one of hundreds of thousands of mothers across America wondering why her doctors continued to prescribe opioid medication to a pregnant woman – and why they failed to warn about the high risk of neonatal abstinence syndrome, or NAS, as well as birth defects and long-term developmental problems.

"I'm very bitter inside – I can't help it," Coleman says now. Although she's now sober from opioids with the help of medically assisted therapy, she admits feeling a sense of shame until she started to meet many other moms who are in the same boat.

Coleman recently joined one of 34 class action suits filed across the United States aiming to require Big Pharma companies, including Purdue, to pay for children's health care and the establishment of a medical monitoring fund to help better determine their long-term needs.

In her case, her son's problems were evident from the day he was born in November 2016 and experienced breathing problems – Coleman recalls that "he was purple" -- that sent him immediately to the neonatal intensive care unit, or NICU. There, doctors discovered a bowel blockage that required immediate surgery and the removal of several centimeters of intestine.

The boy spent his first two months in the hospital, and there were new problems as soon he was allowed to go home. "His bowels were uncontrollable," Coleman remembered, and he was soon switched to cloth diapers because of frequent rashes. This was on top of other symptoms consistent with NAS: birth: frequent diarrhea and vomiting; high-pitched crying; irritability; difficulty sleeping, swallowing and eating; heavy sweating, tremors and signs of pain.

Coleman said she decided to wait until her son's third birthday – which just occurred – before she brings him in for a round of testing to better understand if he's experiencing developmental difficulties or needs early intervention. She said she agrees with the goal of the class-action suits to make that kind of testing routine.

"I feel like there should be studies or more research," she said, adding, of her son: "Yes, he's three, but how will this affect him later on? We need more research from more kids, so that people will know more in the future."