

Not long ago, Jennifer Scully started getting phone calls from teachers about something unusual going on with her 5-year-old daughter. The girl would occasionally stare blankly off into space for two or more minutes, unresponsive to adults or anyone else.

What Scully's daughter was experiencing was a rare type of seizure – just one of the many unusual symptoms that the child has coped with since she was born with neonatal abstinence syndrome, or NAS, after her mother – a 42-year-old upstate New York woman – was prescribed opioid medication for pain from back surgery and breast cancer.

Scully said that in addition to the unusual seizures, her daughter is undersized, with a thin vocabulary of only about 50 words, and was in diapers until she turned 4. She says the girl – who has been diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder and OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) – is generally about two years behind other kids.

“Because I’m a nurse” – Scully’s profession before all of this happened – “I pay a lot more attention to things,” she said. That means she won’t leave her daughter with a babysitter who might not watch the child closely enough or understand the things that might abruptly upset her.

When Scully unexpectedly became pregnant in 2014, her prescription-drug regimen wasn’t the primary focus of her doctors. She’d broken her back the year before, and had been prescribed Purdue Pharma’s OxyContin and other medications to deal with the severe pain. Then, Scully’s physicians learned she had breast cancer – requiring chemotherapy – and that she was having a baby. They thought it best she remain on painkillers.

“They said, ‘We’re not taking you off and besides, it won’t affect the baby,’” recalled Scully, saying her back, cancer and pregnancy doctors all agreed. When her daughter was born in September 2014, the child was diagnosed with NAS and spent five days in the hospital dealing with tremors, high-pitched crying and other symptoms.

Now, her physicians told Scully that “it isn’t like it used to be” for a child born with drug dependency, that her five days in neonatal intensive care would be the end of a brief ordeal. “They said that at the most I’ll have a cranky baby,” she recalled – a gross underestimation of a child’s struggles that were just beginning.

Only now does Scully – who is still facing treatment for the addiction that she developed to opioid painkillers – fully understand what it means to be the mother to one of an estimated 750,000 children in the United States over the past two decades facing often serious issues because of exposure to opioids in the womb.

Many of their moms are like Scully: Women who were legally prescribed drugs like OxyContin for legitimate pain issues, with little or no warning of what could happen during a pregnancy. The New Yorker is currently seeking justice in a class action lawsuit seeking long-term health care and a medical monitoring fund for these kids.

“They” – the big pharmaceutical firms – “need to be held responsible for what they’ve done,” Scully said, adding: “I expected a healthy child. None of this is my fault.”