



Jaundice

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is a condition where a newborn baby's skin turns yellow because a high amount of bilirubin is produced, and because a young liver cannot get rid of it quickly enough. Bilirubin is a brownish-yellow chemical that is made when red blood cells have been broken down. The body gets rid of bilirubin through the stool (poo).

What are the symptoms of jaundice?

Jaundice is very common in newborn babies. It makes a baby's skin and the whites of the eyes turn a yellow colour. You may notice it between 1 and 4 days after your baby is born. It will first appear on your baby's face and chest. Babies who have higher levels of bilirubin (severe jaundice) may seem very tired and cranky, and feed poorly because they are too hard to wake up.

Will jaundice hurt my baby?

Most jaundice is not harmful to your baby and disappears when your baby's body learns to deal with bilirubin. But in some babies there is so much bilirubin that it can be harmful. If the level of bilirubin becomes very high it can harm your baby's brain.

How do I know if my baby's bilirubin levels are too high?

There is a blood test to measure the amount of bilirubin in your baby's body. Hospitals routinely check this before you take your baby home. Your nurse will receive the results of this blood test and consult with your doctor or midwife if the level is high. If the level is high enough to need treatment, your nurse, doctor or midwife will talk with you about treatment. If the level is not high enough to need treatment, but may get worse, your doctor or midwife will arrange a follow-up visit to do another test.

How is jaundice treated?

Most of the time, jaundice goes away on its own after the first few days. When a baby is feeding well they can get rid of jaundice more effectively.

Sometimes babies need more help to get their bilirubin levels down. One way to do this is with phototherapy, where your baby's skin is exposed to blue light. The skin absorbs the light and changes the bilirubin so that the body can more easily get rid of it in stool and urine. The phototherapy is very safe and usually done in the hospital.

Putting your baby in direct sunlight does not work as well and can be harmful. You should first discuss this with your health care provider.

Is phototherapy safe?

Phototherapy is safe. Your baby's eyes will be protected with special eye patches as a precaution. In some cases phototherapy may cause skin rash or loose bowel movements.

After I leave the hospital, when should I call my doctor?

Call your doctor or midwife if your baby shows any of the following symptoms:

- refuses to breastfeed or bottle feed
- is sleepy all the time
- has lost more than 10% of birth weight
- jaundice colour that seems to be getting worse

If your baby is having trouble with breastfeeding, please contact us at (905) 883-2060 to make a follow up appointment with our lactation consultant.

Source: Adapted, with permission, from the Canadian Paediatric Society's parent document "Jaundice in newborns". For more information, visit www.caringforkids.cps.ca.