

# Newborn Jaundice

(Hyperbilirubinemia)

## What is jaundice?

Jaundice is a condition that makes the skin and sometimes the whites of the eyes appear yellow. Any newborn can develop jaundice. In fact, it occurs in more than half of all full-term babies and in an even higher number of premature infants.

Jaundice is temporary and painless, and it is usually not dangerous to most infants. In rare cases, however, jaundice can lead to serious complications, such as brain damage. For this reason, a healthcare professional should closely monitor your baby's condition.

## Where does jaundice appear?

Jaundice usually appears on the face and then moves to the chest, abdomen, arms, and legs. The whites of the eyes may also look yellow. The best way to see whether your baby is jaundiced is to look at him in natural daylight or in a room with fluorescent lights.

## What causes jaundice?

Jaundice is caused by a buildup of **bilirubin** in the blood. Bilirubin is a yellow substance released during the normal breakdown of red blood cells. Bilirubin can build up for several reasons.

Bilirubin most commonly builds up because a newborn's liver is not yet fully developed. The liver is responsible for removing bilirubin from the blood. In the womb, the infant's bilirubin is removed by the mother's liver. When the baby is born, bilirubin continues to be produced, even though it is no longer filtered through the mother. Until the infant's liver becomes mature enough to keep up with the bilirubin removal, the bilirubin builds up in the blood, causing the skin and sometimes the whites of the eyes to turn yellow. This type of jaundice, called **physiologic jaundice**, is the most common type of newborn jaundice. It occurs more often in premature infants because their livers are even less developed than those of full-term infants.

## When does jaundice usually appear?

Most jaundice usually develops in the first few days after birth. Be alert for the development of jaundice during the first few days after your baby goes home from the hospital. It is important that your baby be seen by a healthcare professional 3-5 days after birth. A newborn's bilirubin level is usually highest during this period.

## What tests will be done?

A healthcare professional may order a skin test or blood test to check your baby's bilirubin level.

## How is jaundice usually treated?

Most babies with jaundice do not need treatment. Healthcare professionals may recommend feeding your baby more often to encourage more bowel movements because bilirubin is passed through stool.

If your baby has moderate to severe jaundice that does not clear up on its own, phototherapy treatment may be recommended. This treatment involves exposing the baby's body to special lights while

she is undressed and wears shields to protect her eyes. These lights help change bilirubin into a form that can be easily eliminated in urine. Some babies are treated in the hospital, and others are treated at home. Special fiber-optic blankets can also be used to treat some babies.

Some babies may require other forms of treatment.

## When should I call a healthcare professional?

Call a healthcare professional if your baby has a yellow color, begins to look or act sick, is hard to wake, fussy, or not nursing or taking formula well. Follow up with a healthcare professional if:

- the yellow color deepens, brightens, or spreads to your baby's abdomen, arms, or legs
- the whites of your baby's eyes become yellow
- your baby is jaundiced for more than 1 or 2 weeks
- your baby is not gaining weight or develops other symptoms that concern you

If your newborn has a fever, becomes increasingly sleepy or is hard to wake, is not feeding well, appears weak or floppy, arches his neck or back backwards, or develops a high-pitched cry, contact a healthcare professional immediately. These symptoms may indicate dangerously high levels of bilirubin and require immediate treatment.

## Healthcare Professional's Instructions:

*Winter*  
10 min natural sunlight, Front & Back  
(In nothing but Diaper) 2 X's daily

*Summer*  
5 min natural sunlight, Front & Back  
(In nothing but diaper) 2 X's daily

**This information is not meant to replace the advice given by a medical professional. If you have any questions, please consult your healthcare professional.**