



Mercy Health
Care first

Your important health information

Jaundice in newborn babies

What is jaundice?

Newborn babies often appear to have a yellowish colouration to their skin and the whites of their eyes. This is called jaundice. It happens when a yellow substance called bilirubin builds up in the baby's blood and tissues caused by the normal breakdown of used red blood cells. It is normal to find small amounts in everyone's blood. Bilirubin is removed from the body by the liver.

In the majority of babies jaundice is normal event and not serious. It will nearly always disappear gradually within a few days without the need for any special treatment.

Why is jaundice common in newborn babies?

Most babies develop jaundice in the first few days of life because:

- while you are pregnant, your baby's bilirubin is removed by the placenta and your liver. After the birth, your baby's liver has to take over the job of removing the bilirubin. This can take a little while as their young livers are maturing and may not be functioning as efficiently in the first few days of life
- it is common for a newborn baby to have extra red blood cells that are broken down after birth, so more bilirubin is produced.

Sometimes jaundice may be caused by other reasons, such as mum and baby's blood reacting with each other and the levels can get high. This is why the midwives will keep an eye on it when checking your baby.

How do I know if my baby is jaundiced?

If your baby is jaundiced, their skin will appear to be yellow as well as the whites of their eyes. You can best see this in good, natural daylight. You will notice it three to five days after birth. Jaundice often appears in the face first. It then moves downwards to the chest, tummy, arms, and legs as the bilirubin level rises.

Your nurse or midwife will monitor your baby for jaundice while you both are in hospital. After discharge from the hospital your baby will be checked by the midwife who will visit you at home. Your maternal and child health nurse (MCHN) and family doctor will also provide you with support.

Mild jaundice usually disappears on its own by the end of the first two weeks of your baby's life.

When should I worry about my baby's jaundice?

- Baby appears jaundiced (looks yellow) in the first 48 hours of age. In this case your baby needs to be checked by a doctor immediately.
- Baby is becoming more yellow and spreading to tummy, arms or legs.
- Baby is very sleepy or lethargic.
- Baby is feeding poorly.
- Baby has fewer wet or dirty nappies.
- If your baby seems unwell.
- Jaundice lasts more than 2 weeks
- Baby's bowel actions are pale yellow in colour
- A combination of the above.

If you notice any of the above signs, seek immediate assistance from your doctor or local hospital.

How is jaundice treated?

The nurse, midwife, MCHN or doctor will:

- ask you questions about your baby's feeding, behaviour and wet and dirty nappies
- weigh and examine your baby.

This will help decide if your baby needs a blood test to measure the bilirubin level. Most babies with jaundice will not need this blood test, nor need any treatment. Babies with mild jaundice in the first week only need extra feeds/fluids. It is important that your baby has at least 6-8 feeds in 24 hours. This supports their body to keep the bilirubin level down.

Your baby will need treatment if the bilirubin value is above a certain level. This level is different depending on how many weeks (gestation) your baby was born at.

Moderate jaundice is treated by placing your baby in an incubator under a safe bright/bluish coloured light. This is called phototherapy. Baby will only wear a nappy during this treatment. Eye shades will be put on to protect the baby's eyes. The light helps to break down the bilirubin in the skin and makes the jaundice fade more quickly. This light treatment may cause your baby to have loose stools (poo). Your baby will need more feeds to help with this.

In some rare cases of severe jaundice, your baby may need to have a special blood transfusion. During this treatment your baby's blood is replaced (exchanged) with fresh blood, to remove the bilirubin.

Further Information

If you have any questions regarding this information, please contact:

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