

# JAUNDICE

## CONGRATULATIONS ON THE BIRTH OF YOUR NEW BABY!

To make sure your baby's first week is safe and healthy, it is important that:

- Your baby is checked for jaundice in the hospital.
- If you are breastfeeding, you get the help you need to make sure it is going well.
- Your baby is seen by a doctor or a nurse at 3 to 5 days of age.

## WHAT IS JAUNDICE?

Jaundice is a condition that causes the yellow color seen in the skin of many newborns. It happens when a chemical called bilirubin builds up in the baby's blood. Jaundice can occur in babies of any race or color, but is more likely to occur in certain races such as Native American and Asian cultures.

## WHY IS JAUNDICE COMMON IN NEWBORNS?

Everyone's blood contains bilirubin, which is a component of our red blood cells. When red blood cells break down, bilirubin is released and then removed by the liver. Before birth, the mother's liver does this for the baby. Most babies develop jaundice in the first few days after birth because babies have a higher red blood cell count than adults and an immature liver.

## HOW CAN I TELL IF MY BABY IS JAUNDICED?

The skin of a baby with jaundice usually appears yellow. The best way to see jaundice is in good light, such as daylight or under fluorescent lights. Jaundice usually appears first in the face and then moves to the chest, abdomen, arms and legs as the bilirubin level increases. The white of the eyes may also be yellow. Jaundice may be harder to see in babies with darker skin color. To see the jaundice better, press firmly with your fingertips for a few seconds over a bony area such as forehead or chest. Release and look at the color of the blanched skin.

## CAN JAUNDICE HURT MY BABY?

Most infants have mild jaundice that is harmless, but in unusual situations the bilirubin level can get very high and might cause seizures, hearing loss or even brain damage. This is why newborns should be checked carefully for jaundice and treated quickly if needed to prevent a high bilirubin level.

## HOW SHOULD MY BABY BE CHECKED FOR JAUNDICE?

If your baby looks jaundiced in the first few days after birth, your baby's doctor or nurse may use a skin test or blood test to check your baby's bilirubin level. A bilirubin level is always needed if jaundice develops before the baby is 24 hours old. Whether a test is needed after that depends on the baby's age, the amount of jaundice, and whether the baby has other factors that make jaundice more likely or harder to see.

## DOES BREASTFEEDING AFFECT JAUNDICE?

Since excess bilirubin is excreted in the stool (poopy diapers), any baby not eating well is at risk for elevated bilirubin levels. All newborns should eat at least every 3-4 hours. Jaundice is more common in babies who are breastfed than babies who are formula-fed, but this occurs mainly in infants who are not nursing well. If you are breastfeeding, you should nurse your baby at least 8 to 12 times a day for the first several days. This will help produce enough milk and will help to keep the baby's bilirubin level down. If you are having trouble breastfeeding or bottle feeding, ask your baby's doctor or nurse or a lactation specialist for help. Breastmilk is the ideal food for your baby, even if your baby develops jaundice.

## WHEN SHOULD MY NEWBORN GET CHECKED AFTER LEAVING THE HOSPITAL?

It is important for your baby to be seen by a nurse or doctor when the baby is between 3 and 5 days old, because this is usually when a baby's bilirubin level is the highest. The timing of this visit may vary depending on your baby's age when released from the hospital and other factors.

## WHICH BABIES REQUIRE MORE ATTENTION FOR JAUNDICE?

Some babies have a greater risk for high levels of bilirubin and may need to be seen sooner after discharge from the hospital. Ask your doctor about an early follow-up visit if your baby has any of the following:

- A high bilirubin level before leaving the hospital.
- Early birth (more than 2 weeks before the due date).
- Jaundice in the first 24 hours after birth.
- Breastfeeding or bottle feeding that is not going well.
- Sleepy baby, not waking to eat every 3-4 hours.
- A lot of bruising or bleeding under the scalp related to labor and delivery.
- A parent or brother or sister who had high bilirubin and received light therapy.

## WHEN SHOULD I CALL MY BABY'S DOCTOR?

Call your baby's doctor if:

- Your baby's skin turns more yellow.
- Your baby's abdomen, arms, or legs are yellow.
- The whites of your baby's eyes are yellow.
- Your baby is jaundiced and is hard to wake, fussy, or not nursing or taking formula well.

## HOW IS HARMFUL JAUNDICE PREVENTED?

Most jaundice requires no treatment. When treatment is necessary, placing your baby under special lights while he or she is undressed will lower the bilirubin level. Depending on your baby's bilirubin level, this can be done in the hospital or at home. Jaundice is treated at levels that are much lower than those at which brain damage is a concern. Treatment can prevent the harmful effects of jaundice.

Putting your baby in sunlight is not recommended as a safe way of treating jaundice. Exposing your baby to sunlight might help lower the bilirubin level, but this will only work if the baby is completely undressed. This cannot be done safely inside your home because your baby will get cold, and newborns should never be put in direct sunlight outside because they might get sunburned.

## WHEN DOES JAUNDICE GO AWAY?

In breastfed infants, jaundice often lasts for more than 2-3 weeks. In formula-fed infants, most jaundice goes away by 2 weeks. If your baby is jaundiced for more than 3 weeks, see your baby's doctor.