

For Your Baby's Health

JAUNDICE IN NEWBORN BABIES

What is Jaundice?

Jaundice is the term for the yellowish or pale orange appearance of the skin and whites of the eyes of newborn babies.

Jaundice usually appears on the second or third day after a full-term baby is born and disappears within a week. This is considered normal or "physiologic" jaundice and affects about half of full-term infants. Eighty percent of premature infants will have jaundice within their first week of life and it may last longer with more noticeable "yellowing".

"Pathologic" jaundice is the term for more severe cases caused by medical problems.

Is Jaundice Serious?

Most instances of jaundice are mild and disappear without treatment. In severe cases or if jaundice is present at birth or appears within a baby's first 24 hours, treatment is usually necessary.

It is important to remember that jaundice is very common in newborns, usually harmless and disappears within a short period of time. Even when jaundice is severe and treatment necessary, the methods are safe and effective in virtually all cases.

What Causes Jaundice?

Jaundice is often a result of an immature liver and other organs, particularly in low birth weight and premature babies.

The liver normally rids the blood of a yellowish substance called bilirubin. Until a baby's liver is fully functional, bilirubin builds up in the bloodstream causing the yellowish appearance of the whites of the eyes and skin. After being changed by the liver, most bilirubin is removed from the body through bowel movements.

How is Jaundice Treated?

If your doctor is concerned about your baby's jaundice, a small blood sample will be taken to determine if the bilirubin level is dangerous.

If treatment is necessary, phototherapy (light therapy) is the technique generally used. Since light increases the body's removal of bilirubin, the baby's skin is exposed to special, high-intensity fluorescent light called "bililights." The baby's eyes are covered to protect them from the light. Sometimes a fiberoptic photo therapy blanket may be used.

The baby's bilirubin level is regularly checked with small blood samples usually taken from the baby's heel. Phototherapy is discontinued when the baby's blood remains at a safe level.

Severe cases or serious forms of jaundice may require a different treatment which provides faster results. An exchange blood transfusion is the most common and effective method. As the baby's blood is replaced with donated blood, excess bilirubin is removed resulting in dramatic and rapid recovery.

Does Breastfeeding Affect Jaundice?

Jaundice is often caused by a baby not getting enough breast milk to provide sufficient bowel movements to remove bilirubin from the body. More frequent breastfeeding (8 to 10 times a day) will increase bowel movements and reduce bilirubin levels. Frequent breastfeedings may also help prevent jaundice.



If you have questions, call Lakeside Women's Hospital at 936-1500 or 1-800-586-7065.