

Jaundice and the Newborn Baby

Parent Information



What is jaundice?

In the first few days after birth, you may notice your newborn baby's skin has a yellow colour. This is called 'jaundice'. Jaundice often develops in normal health babies in the first week or so of life. Jaundice is caused by high levels of a chemical called 'bilirubin' in your baby's body.

In most babies it is a normal event and not serious. It will nearly always disappear gradually over a few days without treatment.

- Some babies who have a lot of bruising when they are born may develop a higher bilirubin level.
- Some breastfed babies (about 5%) will have a mild jaundice which can last a few weeks. This is called 'breast-milk' jaundice. Breastfeeding should continue as it is the best food for your baby.

Why can jaundice be harmful to my baby?

- Babies with a moderate level of bilirubin may be more sleepy than usual and may not feed well. Encouraging your baby to feed more often is usually enough to keep their bilirubin levels down.
- If untreated, extremely high levels of bilirubin can damage parts of the brain, including the parts that affect hearing, vision and control of movement.

Signs of jaundice.

- Many babies are sent home in the first 2 days of life, so parents need to watch their baby for signs of jaundice.
- If you have been discharged and your baby
 - Looks yellow and is less than 48 hours of age
 - Is rapidly becoming more yellow
 - Is yellow on the tummy, arms or legs and becoming sleepy
 - **Take your baby to the Emergency Department at your nearest hospital.**

Treatment for neonatal jaundice.

- Babies who are well and are mildly jaundiced require frequent feeding.
- If the bilirubin level is high, phototherapy (light therapy) may be used.
- The light changes the bilirubin so it can then be passed out of the baby's body.
- Phototherapy is safe and effective.
- Your baby will be admitted to hospital for treatment .
- You will be able to still care for your baby as much as possible.

The care will include:

- Being placed in a warm covered cot or onto a light bed
- Having an eye protector placed over your baby's eyes
- Being nursed naked with just a nappy on so maximum light can fall onto the skin
- Having feeds more often
- Having blood tests to see if your baby still needs phototherapy