

Jaundice in newborns

What is jaundice?

Jaundice (**jawn-diss**) is an abnormal yellow skin color sometimes found in newborn babies. It can also make the whites of the eyes yellow.

What causes newborn jaundice?

When red blood cells break down, a substance called bilirubin (**bill-ee-roo-bin**) is released into the blood. This is normal. Usually, the bilirubin is processed by the liver and removed from the body through the stools (bowel movements). But too much bilirubin (called hyperbilirubinemia (**hie-per-bill-ee-roo-bih-nee-me-ah**)) can lead to jaundice.

Bigger babies can handle higher bilirubin levels than smaller ones. Whether a baby needs treatment may depend on size and weight.

Several factors may lead to increased risk for jaundice: prematurity, baby's blood type being different from the mother's, bruising during birth, and breastfeeding.

How is newborn jaundice treated?

In most cases, newborn jaundice is mild and will go away without treatment. Full-term infants who are breastfed may have jaundice if they are not getting enough breast milk to stool very often. Treatment in this case is to breast-feed more often, at least 8 to 12 times per day.

Premature babies are often not able to take in enough nourishment to stool often and remove enough bilirubin. These infants may need intravenous (IV) fluids to help them until the bilirubin level has lowered.

Phototherapy (light therapy) can help break down bilirubin into a form that is easier for the liver to remove. This treatment is usually needed for 2 to 5 days. The baby's clothes are removed and the light from a special lamp shines on the skin, either over or under the baby.

While receiving light therapy, your baby may need to be kept warm with an isolette or a warmer. Patches are used over the eyes to protect them from the light.

Babies can receive phototherapy at home. If this is needed, you will be taught how to use the equipment.

Questions?

This sheet is not specific to your child but provides general information. If you have any questions, please ask the doctor or nurse.

Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota
Patient/Family Education
2525 Chicago Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55404
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