



London Health Sciences Centre

Patient Information

INFANT JAUNDICE

What is Jaundice?

Jaundice is a common condition in newborn infants. It can give the skin or the sclera (white part of the eyes) a yellow colour. The yellow colour comes from the bilirubin in the blood. Before birth, the mother's liver removes the bilirubin from the baby's blood. After the baby is born, it takes a few days for the baby's liver to get better at removing the bilirubin on its own. During this time, many babies develop jaundice. Jaundice can occur in a baby of any race or colour.

Can I reduce the risk of Jaundice for my baby?

Feeding your infant often (especially breastfeeding) in the first few hours after birth can help lower the risk of jaundice. This helps your baby pass more stools (bowel movements) and gives your infant's liver the energy it needs to remove the bilirubin.

Is Jaundice harmful?

Most babies have mild jaundice, which is not harmful. However, it is possible for an infant to have so much bilirubin in their blood that it does become harmful. A very high bilirubin level can damage a baby's brain and cause lasting health problems.

As a safety measure, we check all newborn babies for jaundice. Babies who have signs of jaundice will be closely monitored and if needed, will be treated to lower the bilirubin level.

Signs of Jaundice

At home, continue to check your infant for signs of jaundice. Call **AT ANYTIME** if you see one or more of the following signs:

- Your baby's skin appears yellow or is becoming more yellow
- The whites of your baby's eyes are yellow
- Your baby is not feeding well or is refusing to feed
- Your baby is sleepy and hard to wake
- Your baby is becoming more fussy
- Your baby has fewer wet diapers or bowel movements than expected for his or her age

How do you test for Jaundice?

The Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that all babies have a bilirubin test to check for jaundice. Your infant's test for jaundice may be done with a bilirubin blood test or with a bilimeter. The bilimeter measures the level of jaundice through the baby's skin using a hand-held non-invasive instrument.

The best time for this test is when your baby is between 24 and 72 hours old. If your baby goes home less than 24 hours after birth, ask your baby's doctor or midwife about a bilirubin test at your first follow-up visit.

Depending on the amount of bilirubin and your baby's age in hours, the doctor or midwife will decide if your baby needs more tests or treatment. Your nurse will tell you if your baby needs another bilirubin test while you are in the hospital or after you go home. If your baby needs treatment, the doctor or midwife will discuss this with you.

How is Jaundice treated?

One way to lower bilirubin levels is to expose your baby's skin to light. This treatment is called phototherapy.

If your baby needs phototherapy, your doctor or midwife will decide which method is best for your baby. The nurse will give you more information and show you how to care for your baby during treatment.

When does Jaundice go away?

In breastfed babies, jaundice often lasts for more than 2 to 3 weeks. In formula fed babies, most jaundice lasts for about 2 weeks. Jaundice may take longer to go away in babies who are sick or premature.

What follow-up care does my baby need?

Your nurse will tell you:

- If your baby needs another bilirubin blood test after you leave the hospital
- When your baby needs to be seen by the doctor or midwife
- Your baby must have a follow-up appointment with the doctor or midwife to make sure that he or she is not becoming more jaundiced. Before leaving the hospital, call to confirm the date and time of your appointment.

If you are concerned that your baby may be getting jaundiced when you are at home it is very important to call your doctor or midwife.

DO NOT wait for your baby's appointment.

If you are unable to reach the doctor or midwife, take your baby to the nearest hospital emergency room to have a bilirubin level checked.