



# Neonatal jaundice

Information for parents



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## What is jaundice?

Jaundice is a term used to describe a yellow discoloration of the skin and eyes. It is common in newborn babies and does not usually cause any problems.

Jaundice develops due to a build up of a substance called bilirubin in the skin. About two thirds of all (otherwise) healthy babies develop jaundice within two to three days of birth.

Newborn babies no longer need the extra red blood cells that they had whilst in the womb to carry oxygen around their body. These red cells break down quickly after birth. Bilirubin is a chemical that is released into the blood stream when red blood cells break down.

As a baby's liver and bowels are still immature they cannot get rid of the bilirubin as quickly as it is made. Excess bilirubin is deposited in skin tissue causing the yellow colour in the skin and whites of the eyes, known as jaundice. Bilirubin is only harmful if it reaches very high levels.

## Are there other causes of jaundice?

Prematurity, bruising at birth and when baby and mother have an incompatible blood group may also cause jaundice. This type of jaundice often happens in the first 24 hours of a baby's life. Blood tests will be taken from mother and baby if blood group incompatibility is suspected.

## What will happen if my baby develops jaundice?

Many babies do not need treatment but it is important to make sure your baby is feeding well. Jaundice can make your baby sleepy, if he/she is not feeding well he/she may become dehydrated which can make jaundice worse.

Adequate fluid is necessary to help flush the bilirubin out of the body, so it may be necessary to feed your baby more frequently.

If your baby appears very jaundiced, a blood test will be taken to assess the level of bilirubin. The result of this test is plotted on a special graph to see if treatment is necessary.

## How is the blood test taken?

Blood is usually taken from your baby's heel. A special sugar solution can be given to your baby to provide pain relief, or you may wish to put your baby to the breast for comfort during the procedure. The heel is then pricked with a special needle and the blood collected.

## What is the treatment?

The treatment for jaundice is called phototherapy. This is a special light source which is placed over the baby lying in their cot. This special light helps to break down the bilirubin in the baby's skin, so that the baby can excrete it.



Your baby is nursed in a cot or incubator in just a nappy. This is so as much skin as possible is exposed to the light. A special cloth eye shield or orange perspex shield is used to protect your baby's eyes as the light is very bright.

Sometimes a special pad known as a Biliblanket is used. This is another way to provide the special blue light source. Your baby will lie on this. If the jaundice level is high your baby may lie on the Biliblanket and have the overhead light on as well.

## Will my baby get cold?

A lid may be placed over the cot so that your baby does not get cold and your baby's temperature will be checked regularly.

## Can I still feed my baby?

Your baby can be fed in the usual way but it is important that he/she spends as much time as possible under or on the treatment light. You may find that your baby has loose bowel motions which are often green. This is usual and it is the baby's way of excreting the bilirubin.

the bilirubin level has remained low.

### **Are there any long term problems after jaundice?**

Neonatal jaundice is rarely harmful. It only becomes a problem if the bilirubin level is very high and the jaundice is not treated.

### **Where can I get more information?**

The doctors, nurses and midwives looking after your baby will be happy to talk to you about any concerns you might have.

**If you would like this leaflet in another format or in a different language, please ask a member of staff.**

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