

# Birth Care & Family Health Services

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## Jaundice and Your Newborn

### What is Jaundice?

Jaundice is the yellow color seen in the skin of many newborns of any race or color. It happens when a chemical called bilirubin builds up in the baby's blood. It is most likely to develop between days 3 and 5 of life.

### Why is jaundice common in newborns?

When our red blood cells reach the end of their lifecycle, they break down and form bilirubin, which is removed by the liver. After birth, it takes a few days for a newborn's liver to remove bilirubin, and so most babies develop at least some jaundice, often starting around their 3<sup>rd</sup> day.

### Can jaundice hurt my baby?

Mild jaundice is both *normal* and *harmless*. However, in a few unusual situations the bilirubin level can become very high and may cause brain damage.

### How can I tell if my baby is jaundiced?

The skin of a baby with jaundice appears yellow. Look for jaundice in good light, such as daylight or under fluorescent lights. It often appears first in the face. Then it may move to the chest, abdomen, arms, legs and possibly whites of the eyes as the bilirubin level increases. It may be harder to see in babies with darker skin color. As babies clear bilirubin out of their system their urine can look pink or have pink crystals evident on the diaper.

### When should I call my baby's health care provider?

- If your baby turns yellow in the first 24 hours of life. This can be very dangerous.
- If you are worried your baby is too yellow, especially if the whites of baby's eyes are yellow
- If your baby is hard to wake, floppy, fussy or not nursing well
- If your baby is NOT peeing or pooping very often

### Is there a test for jaundice?

If your baby looks jaundiced in the first few days after birth, a skin or blood test might be done to check the bilirubin level. It is always needed if jaundice develops in the 1<sup>st</sup> 24 hours of life. After that, it depends on the baby's age, the amount of jaundice, and other factors that make jaundice more likely or harder to see.

### Does breastfeeding affect jaundice?

Jaundice is more common in babies who are breastfed, but mainly in infants who are not nursing well. Nursing your baby 8 to 12 times a day for the first few days helps to keep the baby's bilirubin level down. If your baby isn't nursing well, ask for help. *Breast milk is the ideal food for your baby.*

### How is jaundiced treated?

Most jaundice requires no treatment since it is normal. Sometimes we recommend "sun baths" for babies at home (see the next page for information). If further treatment is necessary, it aims to prevent the harmful effects of jaundice. It is started at much lower levels than those at which brain damage is a concern. Your undressed baby will be placed under special lights to lower the bilirubin level. This is usually done in the hospital but can be done at home if the condition is identified early.

### When does jaundice go away?

Jaundice often lasts for more than 2 to 3 weeks but should improve gradually each day. If your baby is jaundiced for more than 3 weeks, please call.