

Infant Jaundice

Infant jaundice is common in newborns. Here are some things for you to know.



What is infant jaundice? It is a yellow discolouration in a newborn baby's skin and eyes that can appear in the first week of life.

What are the symptoms of jaundice?

Jaundice makes a baby's skin and the whites of the eyes turn yellow. It usually shows up during the baby's first three to five days of life. Then it disappears within seven to ten days as the baby's body learns to deal with bilirubin. Babies who have higher levels of bilirubin or jaundice may seem very tired and cranky, and feed poorly because they are too tired to wake up.

What causes jaundice?

It happens because the baby's blood has an excess of bilirubin. Bilirubin is made when red blood cells break down in the body. Newborn babies are born with more red blood cells than they need. Jaundice occurs when a baby's liver is not mature enough to get rid of the bilirubin in the blood stream.

Some other factors that may contribute to jaundice are prematurity, an infection, bruising or other conditions that make red blood cells easy to break down.



What can you do?

Feeding (especially breastfeeding) your baby often in the first hours and days after birth helps reduce the risk of jaundice.

Feeding baby 8 or more times in 24 hours (every 2-3 hours at least) will help pass more stool and get rid of the bilirubin. Wake baby for feeding if they are sleepy and not feeding well. If babies do not feed often or well enough jaundice may not clear quickly and baby may be sleepier and not want to feed.

Provide lots of skin-to-skin contact.

Will jaundice hurt my baby?

Most jaundice is not harmful to your baby as it is not common for babies to have harmful levels of bilirubin. Fortunately, most jaundice is not severe and complications can usually be prevented. However, in some situations high levels can affect a baby's brain or lead to deafness, problems with movement or serious developmental delay.

A healthcare professional will watch your baby's bilirubin levels in the hospital to make sure they are not too high. Your doctor will perform a physical examination and blood tests. If the bilirubin levels are higher than normal, your baby will be treated with special lights (phototherapy) to help lower these levels before any harm can be done.

After I leave the hospital, when should I call my Doctor/ Nurse Practitioner?

- Baby is not feeding frequently
- Baby is sleepy all the time
- Baby shows signs of dehydration, such as having few wet diapers
- Baby has lost a significant amount of weight (more than 10 per cent of their weight at birth)
- Baby is extremely jaundiced (arms and legs are a yellow or orange colour)
- The jaundice is spreading or getting darker or more intense
- Baby is starting to look or act sick

For more information or assistance:



Call your Community Health Nurse

Your community health nurse is available for support. They can connect you with local resources in your community.



Call the HealthLine

Call 811 / TTY 1-888-709-3555



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