



# Jaundice

Jaundice is a very common problem in babies. It's also very treatable. The yellow discoloration of the skin and eyes happens when the baby's blood contains too much bilirubin – this is caused by a breakdown of red blood cells. In the womb, the mother's body removes bilirubin from the baby's bloodstream through the placenta. At birth, the baby's body must quickly adjust to doing this on his own. Sometimes it takes a few days for the baby's liver to work well and the baby may develop jaundice during this time.

## Babies at Higher Risk for Developing Jaundice

- Preterm infants
- Babies bruised during birth
- Newborns with a brother or sister who had jaundice
- Babies whose mothers are RH negative and/or have type O blood
- Babies of Middle Eastern, East Asian, or Mediterranean ethnicity

Premature babies – whose body organs are not yet mature and lack full function – are often slower to process bilirubin. Premature babies are also at increased risk for jaundice due to not being able to feed enough. Bilirubin leaves the body through the baby's stool. If the baby feeds less, then the stools are reduced, which can cause bilirubin to be reabsorbed in the intestine and build up in the bloodstream.

Babies who have jaundice can be very sleepy which also affects their ability to feed adequately. Frequent breastfeeding in the first few days of life is recommended and may be needed to be supplemented with pumped breast milk, donor milk or formula.

Your baby's stools may become loose and green as a result of the excreted bilirubin. Diaper cream may help prevent a rash.

## Screening

Your baby will be screened for jaundice prior to discharge. Bilirubin levels are usually the highest when your baby is three to five days old; therefore, it is important that your baby be seen by his or her pediatrician within two days of discharge from the hospital to further assess for symptoms of jaundice.

It's important to monitor the bilirubin levels of all newborns because if the level gets too high and isn't properly treated, it could cause a type of brain damage called Kernicterus. A child with kernicterus can have cerebral palsy, problems with vision, hearing loss, and sometimes mental retardation. Kernicterus can be prevented by proper treatment of jaundice.

## Treatment

Some babies may require a technique called phototherapy to treat jaundice. Phototherapy is the use of special high power lights, or bili-lights, to speed up the removal of bilirubin. Baby will need to wear special eye shields while under phototherapy to protect their eyes.

## Symptoms

Talk with your doctor or nurse immediately if your baby:

- Has fewer than four wet or dirty diapers in 24 hours
- Is very sleepy and hard to wake for feedings
- Has trouble breastfeeding or sucking from a bottle
- Cannot be comforted or has a shrill and high-pitched cry
- Appears limp or floppy