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Patient Education:

# Jaundice, Newborn

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# Jaundice, Newborn

Jaundice is a yellowish discoloration of the skin, whites of the eyes, and mucous membranes. It is caused by increased levels of bilirubin in the blood. Bilirubin is produced by the normal breakdown of red blood cells. In the newborn period, red blood cells break down rapidly, but the liver is not ready to process the extra bilirubin efficiently. The liver may take 1–2 weeks to develop completely. Jaundice usually lasts for about 2–3 weeks in babies who are breastfed. Jaundice usually clears up in less than 2 weeks in babies who are formula fed.



## CAUSES

Jaundice in newborns usually occurs because the liver is immature. It may also occur because of:

- Problems with the mother's blood type and the baby's blood type not being compatible.
- Conditions in which the baby is born with an excess number of red blood cells (*polycythemia*).
- Maternal diabetes.
- Internal bleeding of the baby.
- Infection.
- Birth injuries, such as bruising of the scalp or other areas of the baby's body.
- Prematurity.
- Poor feeding, with the baby not getting enough calories.
- Liver problems.
- A shortage of certain enzymes.
- Overly fragile red blood cells that break apart too quickly.

## SYMPTOMS

- Yellow color to the skin, whites of the eyes, and mucous membranes. This may be especially noticeable in areas where the skin creases.
- Poor eating.
- Sleepiness.
- Weak cry.

## DIAGNOSIS

Jaundice can be diagnosed with a blood test. This test may be repeated several times to keep track of the bilirubin level. If your baby undergoes treatment, blood tests will make sure the bilirubin level is dropping.

Your baby's bilirubin level can also be tested with a special meter that tests light reflected from the skin. Your baby may need extra blood or liver tests, or both, if your baby's health care provider wants to check for other conditions that can cause bilirubin to be produced.

## TREATMENT

Your baby's health care provider will decide the necessary treatment for your baby. Treatment may include:

- Light therapy (*phototherapy*).
- Bilirubin level checks during follow-up exams.
- Increased infant feedings, including supplementing breastfeeding with infant formula.
- Giving the baby a protein called immunoglobulin G (IgG) through an IV. This is done in serious cases where the jaundice is due to blood differences between the mother and baby.
- A blood exchange where your baby's blood is removed and replaced with blood from a donor. This is very rare and only done in very severe cases.

## HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Watch your baby to see if the jaundice gets worse. Undress your baby and look at his or her skin under natural sunlight. The yellow color may not be visible under artificial light.
- You may be given lights or a light-emitting blanket that treats jaundice. Follow the directions the health care provider gave you when using them for your baby. Cover your baby's eyes while he or she is under the lights.
- Feed your baby often. If you are breastfeeding, feed your baby 8–12 times a day. Use added fluids only as directed by your baby's health care provider.
- Keep follow-up appointments as directed by your baby's health care provider.

## SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your baby's jaundice lasts longer than 2 weeks.
- Your baby is not nursing or bottle-feeding well.
- Your baby becomes fussier than usual.
- Your baby is sleepier than usual.
- Your baby has a fever.

## SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your baby turns blue.
- Your baby stops breathing.
- Your baby starts to look or act sick.
- Your baby is very sleepy or is hard to wake up.
- Your baby stops wetting diapers normally.
- Your baby's body becomes more yellow or the jaundice is spreading.
- Your baby is not gaining weight.
- Your baby seems floppy or arches his or her back.
- Your baby develops an unusual or high-pitched cry.
- Your baby develops abnormal movements.
- Your baby vomits.
- Your baby's eyes move oddly.
- Your baby who is younger than 3 months has a temperature of 100°F (38°C) or higher.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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