

Jaundice in Newborns

What is Jaundice?

Jaundice is very common in new born babies. It is caused by the breakdown of red blood cells which then release bilirubin. This bilirubin gives a yellowish color to the skin and eyes in the newborns. When a baby has jaundice, it means either his/her body is making too much bilirubin or the liver is not getting rid of it quickly enough.

Is Jaundice Harmful?

Most jaundice is not harmful to your baby. It usually shows up in the first 3-5 days after birth. Then it disappears from the baby's body by 10 days of life.

In some situations, however, there is so much bilirubin in a baby's blood that it can be harmful. If the level of bilirubin becomes very high, it may affect some of the baby's brain cells. This may cause the baby to be less active.

How Can You Prevent Jaundice?

Feeding (especially breastfeeding) your baby often in the first hours and days after birth helps reduce the risk of jaundice. Your baby will pass more stool, and the milk gives your baby's liver the energy it needs to process bilirubin.

How do I know whether my baby's bilirubin level will become too high?

There is a test that can measure the amount of bilirubin in your baby's body, and helps your midwife to determine whether your baby needs treatment. Your midwife can use a special device that measures the bilirubin in the skin (transcutaneous bilirubin – TcB) or take blood from your baby

to measure the bilirubin in the blood (total serum bilirubin – TSB).

How is Jaundice Treated?

One way to reduce bilirubin levels is to expose the baby's skin to light, a process called phototherapy. Phototherapy is safe, but is only used when needed (usually for 2-3 days). In severe cases, the baby may need to be given fluids intravenously (through the veins by needle) or through a blood transfusion.

What babies are more at risk of developing severe jaundice?

- preterm babies born before 37 weeks gestation
- babies who weigh less than 2500g at birth
- babies whose blood group is incompatible with mom's
- babies who develop jaundice early, especially during the first 24 hours of life
- babies whose jaundice has moved to the arms and legs
- babies who have bruises and a difficult delivery (e.g. forceps were used); and
- Babies whose siblings had jaundice at birth and needed treatment.

Call Your Midwife If Baby:

- is not feeling well or refusing to feed
- is sleepy all the time and is hard to wake up
- has fewer wet diapers or bowel movements than expected
- shows signs of dehydration (dry mouth/ tongue, cracked lips, weak cry, dark and strong smelling urine)

- Reference : Canadian Pediatric Society. Available at www.caringforkids.cps.ca
- New Parent Resource Guide 2014, Region of Waterloo Public Health