



Jaundice and Your Newborn

Answers to common questions

In the first week of your baby's life, it is very important to:

1. Check your baby for jaundice in the hospital.
2. Get help if you are breastfeeding to make sure it is going well.
3. Have your baby seen by a doctor or nurse at 3 to 5 days of age.

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is the yellow color seen in the skin of many newborns. It happens when a chemical called bilirubin (bill-ē-rube-in) builds up in the baby's blood. Jaundice can occur in babies of any race or color.

Why is jaundice common in newborns?

Everyone's blood contains bilirubin, which is removed by the liver. Before birth, the mother's liver does this for the baby. After birth, the baby's liver must start to do the work. Most babies get jaundice in the first few days after birth because it takes a few days for the baby's liver to get better at removing bilirubin.

How can I tell if my baby is jaundiced?

The skin of a baby with jaundice usually looks yellow. The best way to check skin color is in good light, such as daylight or under fluorescent lights. Jaundice usually appears first in the face and then moves to the chest, stomach, arms and legs as the bilirubin level goes up. The whites of the eyes may also be yellow. Jaundice is harder to see in babies with darker skin color.

Can jaundice hurt my baby?

Most infants have mild jaundice that is harmless. In rare cases, the bilirubin level can get very high and might cause brain damage. This is why newborns should be checked carefully for jaundice and treated to prevent a high bilirubin level.

When should my baby be checked for jaundice?

A bilirubin level is needed if your baby has jaundice in the first 24 hours after birth.

Your baby's doctor or nurse may use a skin test or blood test to check your baby's bilirubin level if your baby looks jaundiced in the first few days after birth.

Does breastfeeding affect jaundice?

Jaundice is more common in babies who are breastfed than babies who are formula-fed. It mainly happens in infants who are not nursing well. If you are breastfeeding, you should nurse your baby at least 8 to 12 times a day for the first few days. This will help you produce enough milk and will help to keep the baby's bilirubin level down.

If you are having trouble breastfeeding, ask your baby's doctor or nurse or a lactation specialist for help. Breast milk is the ideal food for your baby.

When should my newborn get checked after leaving the hospital?

It is important for your baby to be seen by a nurse or doctor when the baby is between 3 and 5 days old. This is when a baby's bilirubin level is highest.

Which babies need more attention for jaundice?

Some babies are more likely to have high levels of bilirubin and need to be seen sooner than 3 days after leaving the hospital. Ask your doctor about an early follow-up visit if your baby has:

- A high bilirubin level before leaving the hospital
- Early birth (came more than 2 weeks before due date)
- Jaundice in the first 24 hours after birth
- Breastfeeding that is not going well
- A lot of bruising or bleeding under the scalp related to labor and delivery
- A parent or brother or sister who had high bilirubin and needed light therapy

When should I call my baby's doctor?

Call your baby's doctor if:

- Your baby's skin turns more yellow
- Your baby's stomach, arms or legs are yellow
- The whites of your baby's eyes are yellow
- Your baby is jaundiced and is hard to wake, fussy or not nursing or taking formula well

How is harmful jaundice treated?

Most jaundice needs no treatment; it just goes away on its own. High levels of bilirubin can cause brain damage but early treatment when levels are lower can prevent harm.

When treatment is needed, your baby is placed, undressed, under special lights that lower the bilirubin level. This special light is called a bili-light. Depending on your baby's bilirubin level, this is done in the hospital or at home.

To Learn More

- Neonatal Intensive Care Unit
206-987-2041
- Ask your child's nurse or doctor
- www.seattlechildrens.org

Putting your baby in sunlight is not a safe way to treat jaundice. Exposing your baby to sunlight might help lower the bilirubin level, but this will only work if the baby is completely undressed. This cannot be done safely inside your home because your baby will get cold, and newborns should never be put in direct sunlight outside because they might get sunburned.

When does jaundice go away?

In breastfed infants, normal jaundice often lasts 2 to 3 weeks. In formula-fed infants, jaundice usually goes away after 2 weeks. If your baby is jaundiced for more than 3 weeks, see your baby's doctor.

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
- For Deaf and hard of hearing callers 206-987-2280 (TTY).

Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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