When Your Newborn is in the Hospital with Jaundice

What is jaundice?
Jaundice is the yellow color seen in the skin of many newborns. It happens when a chemical called bilirubin (bill-ë-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.

How will my baby be checked for jaundice?
The nurse will draw blood for testing 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 every 2 to 3 hours 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.
How is jaundice treated?

Mild to moderate jaundice will go away on its own in the first couple weeks as the baby’s body gets rid of the extra bilirubin.

For high levels of jaundice, special lights that lower the bilirubin level are placed above and below your baby. These special lights are called LED phototherapy lights or a bili-light. Your baby will be naked or only wearing a diaper while having light therapy so the light shines on as much skin as possible. They will wear eye shades while under the bili-light. It is important for your baby to stay under the bili-light as much as possible during treatment.

Feed your baby often to help remove bilirubin through their stool and urine. Your baby should feed every 2 to 3 hours.

While in the hospital, a blood sample will be taken, as needed, for your doctor to check your baby’s bilirubin level. Your baby will be able to leave the hospital when the bilirubin level is lower and your baby is feeding well.

If a baby has severe jaundice that has not gotten better with other treatment, a blood exchange transfusion may be done in our intensive care unit.

When should my newborn get checked after leaving the hospital?

It is important for your baby to be seen by your primary care provider for a follow-up appointment one day (24 hours) after leaving the hospital.