

Treating Jaundice in Healthy Newborns

Guidelines for Parents by the American Academy of Pediatrics

You may have been told that your child has jaundice and you probably have many questions about this condition. Jaundice is a common condition in newborn infants that usually shows up shortly after birth. In most cases, it goes away on its own. If not, it can be treated easily. This information has been developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics to help you understand this common condition and how it is treated.

What is jaundice?

A baby has jaundice when bilirubin, which is produced naturally by the body, builds up faster than a newborn's liver can break it down and get rid of it in the baby's stool. This happens because of one or more of the following reasons:

- The baby's developing liver is not yet able to remove the bilirubin from the blood.
- More bilirubin is being made than the liver can handle.
- Too much of the bilirubin is reabsorbed from the intestines before the baby gets rid of it in the stool.

Too much bilirubin makes a jaundiced baby's skin look yellow. This yellow color will appear first on the face, then on the chest and stomach, and, finally, on the legs.

What is bilirubin?

Everyone's blood contains hemoglobin found in red blood cells. Red blood cells live only a short time and, as they break down, the oxygen-carrying substance (hemoglobin) is changed to yellow bilirubin. When you get a bruise on your arm, you have a "black and blue" mark. This is blood under the skin. After a few days, the bruise is a yellow-green color. The blood has broken down and you are seeing bilirubin. Normal newborns have more bilirubin because their liver is not efficient at removing it. Older babies, children, and adults get rid of this yellow blood product quickly, usually through bowel movements.

Can jaundice hurt my baby?

Jaundice can be dangerous if the bilirubin reaches too high a level in the blood. The level at which it becomes dangerous will vary based on a child's age and if there are other medical conditions. A small sample of your baby's blood can be tested to measure the bilirubin level. Initially, bilirubin may be measured through the skin with a special machine in the hospital. Other tests may be needed to see if your baby has a special reason to make extra bilirubin that is causing the jaundice.

*Treating Jaundice in Healthy Newborns (continued)***How do I know if my baby has jaundice?**

Parents should be aware of any changes in their newborn's skin color or the coloring in the whites of their child's eyes. Look at the baby under natural daylight or in a room that has fluorescent lights. A quick and easy way to test for jaundice is to press gently with your fingertip on the tip of your child's nose or forehead. If the skin looks white (this is true for babies of all races), there is no jaundice. If you see a yellowish color, contact us to check your baby to see if significant jaundice is present.

How is jaundice treated?

Mild to moderate levels of jaundice do not require any treatment. If high levels of jaundice do not clear up on their own, your baby may be treated with special lights or other treatments. These special lights help get rid of the bilirubin by altering it to make it easier for your baby's liver to get rid of it

We sometimes treat babies with these lights at home. Another treatment is more frequent feedings of breast milk or formula to help pass the bilirubin out in the stools. Increasing the amount of water given to a child is not sufficient to pass the bilirubin because it must be passed in the stools.

Rarely, babies may require treatment of their blood to remove bilirubin. For example, in a few cases of very high bilirubin levels, a blood exchange is done to give a baby fresh blood and remove the bilirubin. This is rarely done today, and when necessary is usually done at New England Medical Center or Children's Hospital. Once your child's bilirubin level goes down, it is unlikely that it will increase again. However, if your child continues to look yellow after 3 weeks of life, call us.

What effect does breastfeeding have on jaundice?

Most breastfed babies do not have a problem with jaundice that requires interruption of breastfeeding. However, it is occasionally necessary to supplement breastfeeding with formula in jaundiced newborns. If your baby has jaundice, do not be alarmed. Remember that jaundice in a healthy newborn is not serious and usually clears up easily.