



Jaundice

Information for parents

What is neonatal jaundice?

Jaundice is the name given to yellowing of the skin and the whites of the eyes. Jaundice in newborn babies is very common, is usually harmless, and usually clears up on its own after 10–14 days.

What causes jaundice?

Newborn babies produce large quantities of the yellow pigment bilirubin. Bilirubin is a product of the breakdown of red blood cells. It is normally processed by the liver and passed out of the body through the bowels in stools (faeces). The skin and eyes turn yellow in jaundice because there is an increased amount of bilirubin in the blood. This happens because in the first few days after birth the baby's liver is less efficient at processing bilirubin, so there tends to be a build-up of bilirubin in the blood.

Is jaundice harmful to my baby?

Jaundice is not usually dangerous for babies. It can make your baby sleepy or not wake for feeds. A few babies will develop very high levels of bilirubin, which can be harmful if not treated. In rare cases, untreated high bilirubin levels can cause brain damage and affect hearing.

Which babies are more likely to need treatment for jaundice?

The following babies are more likely to develop jaundice that needs treatment:

- Babies who were born early (at less than 38 weeks gestation)
- Babies who have a brother or sister who had jaundice that needed treatment as a baby
- Babies whose mother intends to breastfeed exclusively
- Babies who have signs of jaundice in the first 24 hours after birth

How is jaundice treated?

Most babies need no treatment for jaundice. However, if your midwife or doctor is concerned they will arrange for your baby to have a blood test to check if your baby needs treatment. The treatment requires admission to hospital and is by using "phototherapy lights". The blue lights help breakdown the bilirubin in the skin. This is usually done by placing the baby on his or her back wearing only a nappy in a

heated cot with the phototherapy lights directly overhead. Your baby's eyes will be protected from the light with a mask. Regular bloods tests are done to monitor the bilirubin level to check if the treatment is working

How can I care for my baby while under the lights?

It is important that your baby stays under the lights as much as possible. A "Bili blanket" can also be used while your baby comes out of the lights to feed. Continue to breast or bottle feed your baby regularly, and offer a feed every 3 to 4 hours. If you are breastfeeding and need support ask to speak to one of the breastfeeding support nurses.

Are there any side effects of the phototherapy lights?

Yes there is a risk that the lights could damage your baby's eyes, so it is important that your baby wears the eye mask. Some babies develop a temporary skin rash, but this does not require any special treatment. Your baby's stools may also become more loose.

When can I take my baby home?

You can take your baby home when the bilirubin level is low enough not to need treatment. When phototherapy is stopped your baby will need another blood test 12–18 hours later to make sure the jaundice has not returned to a level that would need further treatment. Your baby may not have to stay in hospital for this and the blood test can often be done by your midwife.

For further advice please contact:

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