

Jaundice

Parent information

Jaundice means that a baby's skin and the whites of their eyes have yellow colouring. This is because of a substance called bilirubin. In our bodies, new red blood cells are being made as the old blood cells are destroyed. Bilirubin is one of the products left over after this happens. It takes time for a newborn baby to be able to remove this bilirubin from their body. Until they do, there can be a build-up in the blood, which then moves into the skin. This leads to the yellowed or jaundice appearance.

How common is jaundice?

- Jaundice is a very common condition in newborn babies.
- As many as 60% of full term babies will get jaundiced.
- This usually appears on the second or third day of life.
- For most healthy full term babies it will begin to fade by the end of the first week after birth.
- Most preterm babies will become jaundiced and many of these will require treatment in the nursery.

How is jaundice level tested?

- With a blood test called a serum bilirubin level (SBR).
- The blood is collected by a small heel prick.
- This level may be measured daily or more frequently depending on the results.

How do we treat jaundice?

- We treat jaundice with special lights, called phototherapy (see next page).
- There are treatment ranges that we use to guide us about when to start phototherapy. These ranges are based on baby's age and weight.
- Most mild jaundice does not require treatment.
- Moderate jaundice is treated with one or two phototherapy lights (see next page).
- Severe jaundice requires many phototherapy lights.
- On very rare occasions a baby may need to have a special blood transfusion, known as an "exchange transfusion", to remove the bilirubin.

About phototherapy

- Phototherapy is light treatment (blue and white lights).
- These lights change the bilirubin so that the baby can easily pass it in their urine and poo.
- Phototherapy can be delivered with the baby in:
 - An incubator with the phototherapy lights positioned above the cot or with the baby lying on a biliblanket.
 - A cot with the biliblanket wrapped around them.
 - A bilibed, which is a special mattress that has lights inside it.
- For the phototherapy to work well babies need to be kept naked and only wear a nappy.

To protect baby's eyes from the bright lights, we cover the baby's eyes with special fabric that blocks out the light.

Is jaundice harmful?

- Mild and moderate levels of jaundice are not harmful.
- Severe jaundice, when not treated, can be very harmful to a baby's brain and lead to a condition called kernicterus.

Can my baby continue to breastfeed?

- In most cases of mild or moderate jaundice, babies under phototherapy will be able to continue to breastfeed.
- In severe cases of jaundice, it may be better for babies to stay under the phototherapy until the jaundice levels drop to a less potentially harmful level. Medical and nursing staff will advise you when this applies to your baby.

Any further questions?

This fact sheet provides general information.

If you have any questions about your baby's care, we encourage you speak to the nursing and medical staff.



Consumers contributed
to this information.