

Newborn Jaundice

What is Jaundice?

Jaundice is the yellowing of your baby's skin, whites of the eyes and body. This is caused by extra bilirubin (the normal breakdown of red blood cells) in your baby's bloodstream.

While you were pregnant, your liver removed your baby's bilirubin. After birth, your baby's red blood cell count is high. These red blood cells break down quickly but your baby's liver can't process them as fast as your liver did. The bilirubin deposits in the skin.

What Does Jaundice Look Like?

Your baby's skin and whites of the eyes may appear yellow. Jaundice usually starts in the face and spreads down the body. The best way to see the yellow color is in sunlight or fluorescent light.

The color goes away when your baby's liver flushes away the broken-down red blood cells through urine or bowel movements.

When Can Jaundice Appear?

Your baby can develop jaundice in the hospital or up to a few days after birth. Symptoms can start as late as five to seven days after birth.

Is Jaundice Serious?

Many infants will get jaundice. Most of the time the jaundice is mild and does not need to be treated.

More serious cases of jaundice can cause serious health problems and need to be treated.

How Is Jaundice Tested?

If your baby shows signs of jaundice in the hospital, your health care provider will give your baby a blood or skin test. This test will measure the bilirubin in your baby's blood.

Your health care provider will test your baby depending on his or her:

- age
- amount of jaundice
- skin color (making the jaundice easier or harder to see).

How is Jaundice Treated?

- Give your baby more breast milk or formula to drink. These feedings help your baby's intestines make more stools. The bilirubin is passed through stools and urine.
- The health care provider may want your baby to spend time under special lights to help break down the bilirubin. These lights look like fluorescent bulbs or are part of a special fiberoptic blanket.

Is a Follow-up Visit Needed?

Your health care provider may want you to return for a follow-up visit if:

- your baby was born early (before 37 weeks)
- developed jaundice within 24 hours after birth, is not breastfeeding well
- has bruising or bleeding under the scalp from delivery
- a sibling had severe jaundice.

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How Do You Care for Jaundice at Home?

If your baby's case of jaundice needs to be treated at home, breastfeed or give formula more often. If you are breastfeeding, nurse your baby 8 to 12 times each day for the first week. This will help you produce more milk and help the bilirubin levels go down.

If your health care provider wants you to place your baby under phototherapy lights, the nurse will help you arrange for this. The lights will be delivered to your home and set up by your choice of home health services.

You should not put your newborn in the sunlight — either outdoors or indoors. If placed in direct sunlight outdoors, your baby could become sunburned. If placed indoors without clothes, your baby could become cold.

How Long Does Jaundice Last?

If you are breastfeeding, the jaundice may last more than 2 to 3 weeks. If you are bottle feeding, the jaundice should go away in 2 weeks.

Even though jaundice is more common in breastfed babies, this occurs mainly if the baby is not nursing well. Breastmilk is best for your baby.

When Should You Call Your Health Care Provider?

Call your health care provider to make an appointment if:

- the jaundice spreads from your baby's head to the legs or feet
- your baby is dehydrated:
 - urinates less than 3 times in 24 hours
 - has dry lips and mouth
 - has sunken eyes.
- your baby has a fever of more than 100.4 F rectally
- the jaundice lasts for more than 14 days
- you can't get your baby to wake up and feed.