



IWK Health

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Newborn Jaundice

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is a condition that causes the skin to appear yellow. It occurs when **bilirubin** builds up in the blood.

Jaundice can be common in newborns. It usually appears in the first week of life.

Jaundice is **not** painful. It is easy to treat, if needed. High levels of untreated jaundice can be dangerous to the body. It may cause deafness, cerebral palsy and brain damage.

Fortunately, most jaundice is **not** severe. Complications can usually be prevented.

What causes jaundice?

When the liver breaks down red blood cells, a substance called **bilirubin** is released. Normally, the bilirubin passes through the intestines and out of the body as **bile**. If a newborn's liver is not ready to break down the bilirubin quickly enough, a baby can develop jaundice.

Infants with high blood levels of bilirubin develop the yellow color when bilirubin stays in the skin. This condition is called **hyperbilirubinemia**.

Testing for jaundice

All babies born in Canada have a blood test to check their bilirubin level. This happens around 24 hours after they are born. A small sample of blood will be taken from your baby's heel.

During the blood test you can comfort your newborn by holding baby skin-to-skin and breastfeeding. If you cannot hold or feed your baby for the test, talk to your nurse. Ask about other ways to help your baby with the pain of bloodwork.

The blood test results are ready in a couple of hours. If the results are within normal limits for your baby's age, no more testing is needed. If your baby's levels are too high, baby may need treatment for jaundice. Or baby may need a repeat blood test to monitor for jaundice.

How is jaundice treated?

Most of the time, jaundice goes away on its own. If treatment is needed, **phototherapy** (treatment with light) will be used. During phototherapy, your baby's skin is exposed to special light. The skin absorbs the light and breaks down the bilirubin. Then baby's body can more easily get rid of it in stool and urine.

It can be harmful to expose your baby to sunlight (direct or indirect). Do not do this without first discussing with your health care provider.

Bilirubin is passed through the baby's bowel movements and urine, so feeding your baby **often** is very important. If you are breastfeeding, **colostrum** is the first milk you produce. Colostrum has a laxative effect, which makes the bowel movements looser. This helps the bilirubin pass from the baby's body. Even a few drops of colostrum is very helpful.

How long will it take to treat your baby?

Infants undergoing phototherapy should have as much skin as possible exposed to the light. Inside the bassinet or warmer, baby usually just wears a diaper.

Phototherapy should be continuous, with breaks only for feeding.

Phototherapy is stopped when bilirubin levels decrease to a safer level. But it is not unusual for infants to still look jaundiced after phototherapy is done.

Bilirubin levels may rebound 18 to 24 hours after stopping phototherapy (although this rarely requires more treatment).

Who is eligible for home phototherapy?

Phototherapy is usually done in the hospital. In some cases, it can be done very effectively in the home. This is when the baby is healthy, feeding well, and at low risk for complications.

Phototherapy that takes place in your home requires equipment from the IWK.

When should I be more concerned about jaundice?

Jaundice can be more serious for some babies, for example:

- babies born before 37 weeks gestation who weigh less than 2500 grams (5.5 lbs) at birth
- whose blood group is incompatible with their mothers' blood group
- who develop jaundice early in life, especially during the first 24 hours
- whose jaundice has moved into the arms and legs
- who have a lot of bruising or swelling under the scalp (called **caput**) after birth
- whose siblings had jaundice at birth and needed treatment in intensive care

After I leave the hospital, when should be concerned about my baby's health?

Seek medical help if your baby shows any of these symptoms:

- refuses to feed
- is sleepy all the time
- has lost a lot of weight (more than 10% of their weight at birth)
- is extremely jaundiced (arms and legs are a yellow or orange colour), or
- jaundice that seems to be getting worse

****This patient/family guide should not be used to replace advice from your health care provider(s). / * Ce guide du patient/de la famille ne doit pas être utilisé pour remplacer les conseils de votre fournisseur de soins de santé.***

****Please, no scented products or fragrances at the IWK. / * SVP, pas de produits parfumés ou des parfums à l'IWK.***

*IWK Family and Newborn Unit, Halifax, NS.
PL-0250 Last Update / Dernière mise à jour: 12/16;
Next Review / Prochaine révision: August 2021*