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What do I need to know about jaundice and my newborn?

What is it?

You may see a yellowish colour in your baby's skin and whites of her or his eyes. This is called jaundice. After birth your baby has extra red blood cells. It is normal for the extra red blood cells to break down. As they break down, a yellow coloured substance called bilirubin is formed. The extra bilirubin in the baby's blood causes the skin and the whites of the eyes to take on a yellowish colour. Babies often want to sleep more and feed less often because of the extra bilirubin.

How many babies get it?

It is common. About half of full term babies and about three quarters of babies born before 37 weeks, also called preterm babies, become jaundiced.

Jaundice is mild in most babies. It lasts only a few days. It reaches its highest level at four to five days of life and then slowly goes down. Some babies develop high levels of bilirubin which can be dangerous if not treated.

Your baby's chances of being jaundiced increase if she or he is born before 37 weeks, is bruised, or has a different blood type than mother.

How can I help my baby?

- Feed your baby as often and for as long as she or he wants. Your milk gives your baby the energy needed to break down the bilirubin.
- Jaundice often makes your baby a little sleepier and slower to feed. You may need to wake your baby to make sure that they feed 8 or more times in 24 hours. Your first breastmilk called colostrum helps the baby poo, which also helps your baby get rid of the bilirubin. Frequent feedings at the breast also help your milk to come in more quickly.
- Do not give your baby water. Water only fills up your baby's tummy, decreases breastfeeding and does not help get rid of the bilirubin.

What else can help?

Your baby's bilirubin level can be tested by a healthcare worker poking the heel to take a tiny amount of blood. Holding and breastfeeding your baby while blood is taken helps your baby by lowering the pain.

Your doctor or midwife may decide to place your baby under special blue lights if the bilirubin amount is up. This is called phototherapy. Phototherapy changes the bilirubin to a harmless form. It can be given in two ways:

- overhead blue lights
- Wallaby® Phototherapy system.

The overhead blue lights are only used in the hospital. The Wallaby® system is a special light that comes from a paddle. This paddle is put on your baby's back. This treatment can be given in the hospital or at home. Talk to your doctor or midwife about the best treatment for your baby.

Talk to the hospital staff about this and any other special needs your baby has while under phototherapy. Nurses in hospital or the community can help you with any breastfeeding questions.



When you go home **call** your doctor, midwife or community health nurse if:

- ▶ You think your baby becomes jaundiced.
- ▶ Your baby is still jaundiced after one week of life.
- ▶ The yellow colour increases in your baby's skin or if you see it on your baby's body, arms or legs.
- ▶ Baby is unusually sleepy and not waking up for feedings 8 or more times a day.

When you go home remember to...

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