Jaundice And Your Newborn Baby

A newborn baby whose skin turns a yellow color has jaundice. This yellow color is caused when a chemical called bilirubin gets too high. This chemical is in the babies blood. Jaundice can happen in babies of any race or skin color. Before a baby is born, the liver of the mother gets rid of the extra bilirubin for the baby.

HOW WILL I KNOW IF MY BABY HAS JAUNDICE?

If your baby has jaundice, the skin will look yellow. You can see this best in good light, such as daylight or under fluorescent lights. Usually, you can first see the yellow color in your baby's face. It then spreads to the baby's:

- Chest.
- Belly.
- Arms and legs.

It spreads as more bilirubin builds up in the blood. The whites of your baby's eyes may also get yellow. If your baby has a dark skin, it may be harder to tell if the baby has jaundice.

CAN JAUNDICE HURT MY BABY?

If your baby has a mild case of jaundice, this will not hurt your baby. But, if the bilirubin level in the baby's blood gets very high, it can cause brain injury. This is why it is important for your baby to be checked carefully for jaundice. It also why it is important to have your baby treated to keep the bilirubin level from getting too high.

HOW WILL MY BABY BE CHECKED FOR JAUNDICE?

If your baby looks jaundiced in the first few days after birth, your doctor may do a skin or blood test to check the bilirubin level. Bilirubin blood levels are always checked on babies who have jaundice before they are 24 hours old.

DOES IT MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE WHETHER I BREASTFEED OR BOTTLE FEED MY BABY?

Jaundice is more common in babies who are:

- Breastfeeding.
- Not nursing well.

If you are breastfeeding, you should nurse your baby at least 8 - 12 times a day for the first few days. This will:

- Help you make enough milk.
- Keep the baby's bilirubin level low.

If you are having trouble breastfeeding, ask your doctor for suggestions. Breast milk is the best food for your baby. If you cannot breastfeed your baby, your doctor can help you decide on the best formula to use.

WHICH BABIES ARE MOST LIKELY TO HAVE JAUNDICE?

Babies who are most likely to have jaundice are those who:

- Start turning yellow before they are 24 hours old.
- Are not breastfeeding well.
- Are born early (more than 2 weeks before the due date).
- Have a high bilirubin level before going home from the hospital.
- Have a lot of bruising and bleeding under the scalp from being born.
- Have a mom, dad, brother or sister who had high bilirubin and had light therapy when they were newborn.

HOW IS JAUNDICE TREATED?

The naked baby will be put under special lights. This is called light therapy. This is so the special lights can reach all of the baby's skin. Your doctor will decide if the light therapy needs to be done:

- In the hospital.
- At home.

Treatment will be started before the level gets high enough to cause brain injury. Light therapy can protect the baby from the harm caused by a high bilirubin level.

WHEN WILL THE JAUNDICE GO AWAY?

Jaundice usually lasts for about 2 - 3 weeks in babies who are breastfed. Jaundice usually clears up in less than 2 weeks in babies who are formula-fed. If your baby's jaundice lasts for more than 3 weeks, call your doctor.

WHEN SHOULD I CALL MY BABY'S DOCTOR?

- Your baby's skin gets more yellow.
- Your baby's belly, arms or legs become yellow.
- The whites of your baby's eyes become yellow.
- Your baby has jaundice, and is hard to wake, fussy or not nursing or taking formula well.

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