

INFORMATION FOR PARENTS
ABOUT JAUNDICE

This information is available in other formats on request. Please ask your nursing staff to arrange this

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is the name given to the yellow appearance of the skin and the whites of the eyes.

Is jaundice common in newborn babies?

Yes. Jaundice is very common in newborn babies. About 60% of term babies and 80% of preterm babies will become jaundiced two or three days after birth. Jaundice reaches its peak at about four days of life and then gradually disappears in most babies by the time they are two weeks old.

Jaundice can occur within the first twenty-four hours after birth, but this is rare. If this happens it may indicate a more serious underlying condition and it is important for a paediatrician to see your baby. They will discuss the possible causes and any treatment that maybe required.

Why do babies become jaundiced?

Jaundice is caused by the build-up of a waste product called bilirubin. The body continuously makes new red blood cells and breaks down old ones. Bilirubin is produced when old red blood cells are broken down. In an adult, red blood cells last about 120 days but in a newborn baby they last for a shorter time. Newborn babies also have a higher than normal number of red blood cells. Because your baby has more red blood cells which are being broken down more quickly there is more bilirubin being made. Your baby's liver removes the bilirubin but the liver is a complicated organ and can take a few days to work properly. So, in the first few days of life bilirubin builds up in the blood and causes some babies to be jaundiced.

Should jaundice go away?

Jaundice normally disappears by the time your baby is ten to fourteen days old. This may take a bit longer if your baby is premature, in which case it can take about three weeks to go away.

Can the level of jaundice be measured?

Yes. The midwife or doctor caring for your baby can measure jaundice by taking a 'biliflash' reading. This is done with a small light meter which is placed on your baby's skin, if this recording is high the doctor will confirm this with a more accurate heel prick blood sample (SBR). This will measure the serum bilirubin level and show whether the jaundice level requires treatment. Occasionally a baby's blood test result will be 'borderline' and the doctor may recommend repeating it later to check levels are not rising too quickly.

Is there any treatment for jaundice?

Most babies will need no treatment at all and the jaundice will disappear by the time your baby is two weeks old. However, a small number of babies do need some treatment as high levels of bilirubin can be harmful. The normal treatment is phototherapy to reduce the bilirubin level. Your baby will be placed naked, except for a nappy, in a cot under a special blue light. Your baby's eyes will be protected with an eye mask or a tinted head box. Alternatively, your baby may be nursed on a bilibed in which case no eye protection is needed. The light converts down the bilirubin to a form that can be more easily removed in urine and stools. Phototherapy can usually be stopped within a few days.

How do I care for my baby having phototherapy?

You will be encouraged to feed your baby at regular intervals so your baby produces plenty of urine. The more time your baby spends in the light the more effective it is - ask for help if your baby is unsettled. Your baby will have further blood tests to check that the bilirubin level is reducing; you can cuddle or preferably feed your baby while the test is being done to soothe and comfort your baby. Midwifery staff will monitor your baby regularly, recording temperature, heart rate and breathing rate as well as checking urine output. Your baby may experience loose green stools and a blotchy rash, this is temporary and will resolve when treatment is stopped. Please speak to a midwife at any time if you have concerns.

Will jaundice harm my baby?

In most cases jaundice is not usually dangerous. If there is any doubt, a blood sample will be taken to measure the bilirubin to make certain there is no risk to your baby.

What if my baby remains jaundiced?

Jaundice normally clears by the time your baby is two weeks old. However, sometimes it lasts longer. If jaundice continues beyond 14 days of age in a full-term baby or 21 days in a premature baby then you will be asked by your midwife or health visitor to see a paediatrician. Your baby will be examined and blood tests will be taken to ensure your baby is well.

If your baby's stools and urine are not a normal colour at any time this should be investigated — contact your midwife, health visitor or GP for advice.

I've been told my baby has breast milk jaundice. What does this mean?

Some babies who are breast fed may have jaundice which continues. Your baby will have blood tests as above to ensure they are well. If these are normal then you may be told your baby has breastmilk jaundice. This is harmless and will gradually disappear. In a small number of cases it can take a few months to totally disappear.

Pannal Ward, Maternity Department
Harrogate District Hospital
Lancaster Park Road
Harrogate HG2 7SX
01423 885959
Direct line: 01423 553157
www.hdft.nhs.uk

Maternity Services
Version: 3.0 May 2018
HDFT approval date: 8th May 2018