

# Jaundice in newborn babies

This information sheet answers some commonly asked questions about jaundice in newborn babies.

**IMPORTANT:** This is general information only.  
Ask your doctor or midwife about what care is right for you.

## What is jaundice in a newborn baby?

Jaundice in a newborn baby is the yellow colouring of their skin and the whites of their eyes. It is common in babies and is not the same as jaundice in adults. The medical term for jaundice in babies is *neonatal jaundice*. If your baby has jaundice they need to be seen by a health care provider.

Your baby may look jaundiced on their first or second day of life. Often you will not see it until the second or third day. Most times the jaundice will go away over one to two weeks (3 weeks for preterm babies) and does not cause any longterm problems for most babies. Sometimes the jaundice needs to be treated (see below).

Breast milk jaundice may develop 5–7 days after birth and is a harmless type of jaundice. There is no need to stop breastfeeding. Check with your health care provider if you think your baby has breast milk jaundice.

## What causes a baby to be jaundiced?

Before your baby is born they have a lot of red blood cells to carry oxygen from the placenta. After birth they don't need as many of these cells. The red blood cells are broken down in the liver and are passed in their stools/poo (bowel movements). Your baby looks jaundiced (yellow) when there is a build up of the broken down red blood cells (bilirubin) in their skin. There is more chance of your baby getting jaundiced and needing treatment if they:

- Are born before full term
- Are not feeding well
- Had a brother or sister who was jaundiced
- Have a different blood group from you (their mother)
- Became bruised during their birth
- Have an infection

There are also other reasons your baby may be jaundiced which your health care provider will discuss with you if required.

## Does jaundice harm your baby?

Most jaundice is mild and is usually not harmful.

If your baby is jaundiced at any time it is very important a healthcare provider sees them to work out if they need any special tests or treatment. If your baby is treated straight away there is little chance of any ongoing problems. However in rare cases if your baby is not treated they may have some problems with their development. This may include seizures and muscle spasms, delays in development, deafness and physical and intellectual disability.

## Can the jaundice level be measured?

There are two ways to measure the jaundice level. A special meter can be placed on your baby's skin to check the jaundice level. If it is high using the meter, or the hospital doesn't use the meter a blood test can help decide if treatment is needed. Jaundice is measured by taking a small amount of blood from your baby's heel to check the level of bilirubin.



*Special meter measuring jaundice level placed on baby's forehead*



## How is jaundice treated?

- Your baby may be sleepy and not feeding well
  - Regular feeding (at least every 3 to 4 hours) is important as it helps digestion and helps your baby pass the waste product (bilirubin) in their stools (poo)
  - You may need help or advice with feeding
- Mild jaundice normally goes away by itself in a few days
- Phototherapy is the most common treatment for jaundice in babies
- Sometimes other treatment is needed. If your baby needs another treatment your baby's doctor will discuss this with you

## How is phototherapy given?

Phototherapy is a special bright light that shines on your baby to help breakdown the bilirubin in their skin so that it can be passed in their stools.

Phototherapy is given from an overhead light or through a special mat or pad. Your baby is placed under or on the special lights in their cot or in an incubator. They only wear a nappy. Eye shields are used to protect their eyes from the bright overhead lights.



Jaundiced baby with eye pads on face while having phototherapy

## Will your baby be followed up after they have gone home from hospital?

If your baby begins to show signs of jaundice it is very important they are seen by a health care professional as they may need further treatment in hospital.

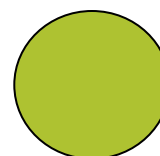
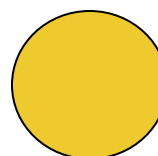
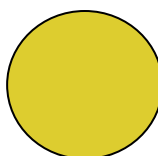
If your baby has had jaundice or has been treated for jaundice, you should go and see your health care provider within 1 to 3 days of leaving hospital. At this visit your baby's jaundice will be checked along with their weight, feeding, urine and bowel movements. You can also talk about any concerns you may have.

## When does your baby need to be seen by a health care provider?

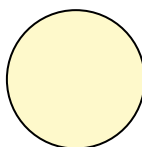
Contact your healthcare provider if you are concerned about your baby or if your baby:

- Appears yellow (jaundiced) at any time especially in the first 24 hours of life
- Has jaundice that spreads down their body
- Becomes more jaundiced after phototherapy has stopped (see below)
- Is not feeding well or is difficult to wake at feeding time
- Is sleepy or is unwell (such as unsettled or vomiting a lot)
- Has less than 3 wet nappies each day from three (3) days of age. Once your milk comes in your baby should have 5 or more wet nappies each day
- Is still jaundiced 14 days after birth
- Passes dark coloured urine
- Passes pale stools (poo)—check the chart below for the normal colour of a baby's stools (poo)

**OKAY:** Yellow (breast feeding) or bright yellow/green (formula feeding) stools (poo)



**NOT OKAY:**



If your baby's **stools are pale** or their **urine is dark** coloured take them to your doctor straight away.

## Support & Information

**13HEALTH** (13 432584) is a phone line that provides health information, referral and services to the public.

**Pregnancy, Birth & Baby Helpline** 1800 882 436 (free call) offers free, confidential, professional information and counselling for women, their partners and families relating to issues of conception, pregnancy, birthing and postnatal care  
[www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline](http://www.health.gov.au/pregnancyhelpline)

**Australian Breastfeeding Association** 1800 686268 (breastfeeding helpline). Community based self-help group offers information, counselling, and support services, on breastfeeding issues [www.breastfeeding.asn.au/](http://www.breastfeeding.asn.au/)

**Lifeline** 13 11 14 Lifeline offers a telephone crisis support service to anyone [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)