Treating Jaundice in Newborn Babies

Jaundice is a condition which causes the yellowing of the skin in newborn babies. In most instances, the jaundice is mild and causes no problems and disappears without treatment. However, if jaundice is severe, or if it is present at birth or appears during the first 24 hours of life, treatment probably will be necessary.

Newborn Jaundice

Jaundice is often normal and usually harmless in newborns. Jaundice occurs when a normal body chemical called bilirubin (“Billy Reuben”) builds up in the baby’s blood. As the old red blood cells are broken down, hemoglobin, the red part of the cells, is changed into bilirubin and removed by the liver. The build up often occurs because the liver of a newborn may be too immature to keep up with bilirubin removal. Bilirubin can build up in the bloodstream, causing the skin and the whites of the eyes to become yellow.

- Jaundice can occur in full-term, small or premature babies.
- Babies born to mothers with diabetes are more likely to develop jaundice.

Other Causes of Jaundice

Two other, more serious kinds of jaundice may occur when the baby’s blood type is different from the mother’s.

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• One of these conditions is called **ABO incompatibility**. The mother usually has type “O” blood and the baby has either type “A” or type “B” blood. If a baby has this condition, jaundice usually appears within the first 2 days after birth.

• Another kind of jaundice occurs when the mother has Rh-negative blood and the baby has Rh-positive blood. When babies have this condition, jaundice may be seen at birth or on the 1st day of life.

• Although there are other causes of jaundice, they are extremely rare.

**Treatment of Jaundice**

Most newborn jaundice is expected to disappear without treatment. Treatment depends on the newborn’s age, the cause of the jaundice, and the severity. A physical exam and lab tests are done.

• Treatment often means the bilirubin level is checked regularly by testing a small sample of blood, often taken from the baby’s heel.

• If you are breastfeeding, you may be encouraged to feed your baby more often.

• Treatment of jaundice may require a longer stay for the newborn in the hospital, depending on the treatment needed.

**Photo-Therapy Treatment**

Photo-Therapy means treatment using light. Sunlight or artificial light speeds up the removal of bilirubin from the blood by the liver to treat the jaundice.

• **Bili-lights**: The baby’s skin may be exposed to special, high intensity lights called bili-lights. The baby’s clothes are removed and the eyes are covered to protect them from the light. The baby is kept warm in an incubator or under a clear plastic shield that fits across the top of a crib. Temporary, and usually minor, side effects may include a rash or loose stools.
• **Fiber optic blanket**: The light is delivered to the baby from the special fibers in the blanket and wrapped around the baby’s upper body.
  
  ▶ If the blanket is used by itself, a fiber optic pad is placed next to the baby’s skin for treatment. A t-shirt or blanket may be used for cover.
  
  ▶ If the blanket is used with bili-lights, then only a diaper is worn by the baby during treatment.

**Exchange Blood Transfusion**

Babies with severe ABO or Rh incompatibility or other severe forms of jaundice may need different and faster treatment. The most common and effective method is an exchange blood transfusion.

• During an exchange transfusion, a tiny, flexible tube is inserted into the vein in the baby’s umbilical cord stump.

• Blood is then gradually withdrawn and is replaced with carefully screened blood. In this way, the excess bilirubin is removed.

• Exchange transfusions are performed with expert care and produce an immediate and significant decline in the blood bilirubin level.

**For More Information**

If your baby has jaundice, you may want additional information about its cause and treatment. Ask questions and talk with your baby’s doctor. Remember that jaundice in newborn babies is very common.

• In most instances, the condition is normal, harmless and temporary.

• When treatment is necessary, safe and effective methods are used.

⚠ **Talk to your doctor or others on your health care team if you have questions. You may request more written information from the Library for Health Information at (614) 293-3707 or email: health-info@osu.edu.**