Jaundice in Newborn Babies

Jaundice is often a harmless and common condition in newborn babies. It is the yellowing of the skin of newborn babies. Normal jaundice may go away about a week or so after birth. Sometimes, treatment may be needed for jaundice.

What You Need To Know

Jaundice occurs when a normal body chemical called bilirubin (“Billy Reuben”) builds up in the baby's blood. The build up often occurs because the liver of a newborn may be too immature to keep up with bilirubin removal. Treatment may be needed when this level gets too high.

- Normal bilirubin levels increase after 24 hours of life.
- Most often it appears first in baby's face, then progresses to the chest, abdomen, arms and legs as the level increases.
- For full term babies, newborn jaundice peaks on day 3 or 4 and usually clears by 7 days of age.
- For preterm babies, newborn jaundice peaks on day 5 or 6 and then clears by 9 or 10 days of age.
- It occurs in both breast and bottle fed babies, and may happen when baby does not get enough fluids.
- May be more common in premature babies.
- There are different reasons why jaundice may occur. Your baby’s doctor will provide testing and treatment.

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Caring For Your Baby

To make sure that your baby is healthy and safe during the first week, it is important that:

- Your baby was checked for jaundice in the hospital. At OSU, we check your baby daily for jaundice.
- If you are breastfeeding, make sure that it is going well and get the help you need.
- Your baby should have 1 to 2 wet diapers for each day the baby is old for the first week. After the first week, your baby should have at least 6 wet diapers each day.
- Have your baby seen by a doctor within 24 to 48 hours after hospital discharge or as recommended by your baby’s doctor.

When to Seek Treatment

Call your baby's doctor if your baby has any of the following signs:

- Baby's skin turns more yellow after release from the hospital
- Baby's arms, abdomen or legs are turning yellow in color
- The whites of your baby's eyes are yellow
- Baby is hard to wake, fussy, or not nursing or not taking formula well
- You have questions or concerns about your baby’s health

For More Information

Read the document “Treating Jaundice in Newborn Babies”.

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.