Jaundice in Newborn Babies

About jaundice
Jaundice is a common and often harmless condition in newborn babies that causes yellowing of the skin and eyes.

Jaundice happens when a normal body chemical, called bilirubin (“Billy Reuben”), builds up in the blood. As the old red blood cells are broken down, the red part of the cells or hemoglobin, is changed into bilirubin and then removed by the liver. The build up of bilirubin often occurs because a newborn’s liver is not ready to keep up with the removal. This causes the skin and the whites of the eyes to become yellow.

Normal jaundice may go away about a week or so after birth, but sometimes treatment is needed. Babies are routinely tested while still at the hospital after birth, and at the first visit with their pediatrician.

Some babies are more likely to have jaundice
There are different reasons why jaundice happens.

- Jaundice can occur in full-term babies, but is more common in premature babies.
- Occurs in both breast and bottle fed babies, and may happen when baby does not get enough fluids.
- Babies born to mothers with diabetes are more likely to develop jaundice.
- More serious kinds of jaundice may occur when the baby’s blood type is different from the mother’s.
- Although there are other causes of jaundice, they are extremely rare.

Treatment
Most newborn jaundice is expected to disappear without treatment. Treatment depends on the newborn’s age, the cause of the jaundice, and the severity. Treatment often means the bilirubin level is checked regularly by testing a small sample of blood, often taken from the baby’s heel. It may also 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.
Once your baby goes home, 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
- Whites of your baby’s eyes are yellow
- Baby is hard to wake, fussy, or not nursing or not taking formula well

**Exchange Blood Transfusion**

Babies with severe forms of jaundice may need different and faster treatment. The most common and effective method is an exchange blood transfusion. A tiny, flexible tube is inserted into the baby’s umbilical cord stump. Blood is then gradually withdrawn and is replaced with carefully screened blood. The bilirubin is removed in the process.

**When to seek treatment**

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**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. Most of the time, the condition is normal, harmless and temporary. When treatment is needed, safe and effective methods can be used.

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**Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.**

For more health information, contact the Library for Health Information at **614-293-3707** or e-mail **health-info@osu.edu**.

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