

# Jaundice



## **Normal Physiological Jaundice (Yellow Skin)**

Jaundice is not a disease; it is a symptom. Jaundice is common in newborns and, in most cases, is a natural part of the newborn's adjustment to life after birth. It may make your baby rather sleepy and slow to feed, but it rarely causes any problems.

Jaundice is caused by large amounts of bilirubin in the blood, resulting in yellowish tinges to the baby's skin and in the whites of the eyes. Bilirubin is the normal product of the breakdown of red blood cells. It is usually eliminated from the system by the liver. But because their livers are immature, many babies become jaundiced in the first few days of life. Within a few days, liver function improves and by the 10th to 12th day the jaundice condition will have almost disappeared.

## **Other Causes of Jaundice**

There are situations in which jaundice may be prolonged or more pronounced.

- **Premature baby:** because the liver is less mature, it takes longer to excrete bilirubin.
- **Infection:** may reduce the liver's efficiency.
- **Bruising:** during the birth process, bruising can result in a larger than usual amount of bilirubin.
- **Mother and baby blood-incompatibility:** when the mother's and baby's blood types are different, the baby may be affected. Antibodies produced by the mother's bloodstream may enter the baby's bloodstream and attack the baby's red blood cells.
- **Breast milk:** breast milk jaundice occurs in about one per cent of breast-fed infants and cannot be diagnosed until the second week of life. This type of jaundice rarely has serious consequences.

## **How Can I Make Sure My Baby is Never Harmed by Jaundice?**

In the hospital, newborn babies are closely monitored for both the beginning and the degree of physiological jaundice. Blood tests may be arranged to be certain that the level of bilirubin in your baby's blood does not rise high enough to cause damage to the brain.

Suspected jaundice should always be reported to your physician. Once the baby is at home, if the jaundice does not seem to be decreasing, the baby should be assessed by a physician. A simple treatment called phototherapy is available to prevent serious consequences. If the bilirubin in the baby's blood reaches a certain level, the baby may be given phototherapy treatment.

## **How Does Phototherapy Work?**

Light changes bilirubin into a harmless chemical, so the baby is placed under special lights to clear the bilirubin from the body more rapidly.

While your baby is undergoing phototherapy, coverings are used to shield the baby's eyes. Your baby will require more frequent feedings to replace fluids lost through phototherapy.