



Phototherapy and Jaundice in the Newborn

*Leading, Learning,
Caring For You*

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is common in newborns and occurs when there is too much bilirubin in the blood. Bilirubin is a normal pigment made when red blood cells break down. If there is too much bilirubin, or the liver is not getting rid of it quickly enough, the jaundice increases. This can make the baby's skin and the whites of the eyes look yellow, although it is not easy to see in all babies.

All babies are at risk for developing jaundice, but it is more likely to occur in babies:

- born prematurely (before 37 weeks)
- bruised during birth
- with a sibling who had newborn jaundice requiring treatment
- whose mothers are Rh negative, mothers who have type O blood and mothers who are DAT positive
- of East Asian background
- babies who have a G6PD gene deficiency (rare)

Is jaundice harmful?

Most jaundice is normal and not harmful. It usually develops during the first few days of life. In very few babies, the blood level of bilirubin rises to a dangerous level which can cause harm to the brain. This is a very rare condition called kernicterus. Before your baby is discharged a blood test for bilirubin will be done by taking a small blood sample. Some babies require more than one blood test.

What can I do?

Feed your baby frequently during the first few days. Feeding often speeds up the passing of bilirubin in your baby's stool.

How is jaundice treated?

Special blue lights, called phototherapy, are used to lower the bilirubin level quickly and safely. Your baby's eyes are protected with eye pads while the baby is under the lights. In order to expose as much skin as possible to the lights, only a diaper is worn. Phototherapy is safe, but it is only used when needed. Usually 12-24 hours of treatment is enough to lower the bilirubin levels.

While your baby is receiving phototherapy at your bedside, please follow the instructions below.

- Keep the curtains down over the phototherapy unit
- Dress your baby only in a diaper
- Keep the eye shields on your baby while the lights are turned on
- The lights can be turned off and the eye shields removed during feedings
- Your baby should be kept a maximum of 45 minutes away from the lights at each feeding
- If your baby is having difficulty settling under the lights, please call your nurse and she will assist you. Your baby can receive phototherapy while being fed or held by you in your bed or on a chair.

Your nurse will be checking your baby frequently. Do not hesitate to call her if you have questions or concerns.

