

Patient information from BMJ

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Jaundice in newborn babies: what treatments work?

You might be worried if your new baby gets jaundice. But it's not usually serious. In most babies the jaundice goes away in a week or two without any treatment. But sometimes the jaundice can become more serious and cause problems in the baby's brain. It's for this reason that doctors always watch jaundice in babies very carefully, so that they can treat it before this happens.

What treatments work?

Jaundice in newborn babies is very common, affecting as many as 70 in every 100 babies carried full term, and 80 in every 100 babies born early (prematurely). It happens when there is too much of a substance called bilirubin in a baby's blood. This makes the baby's skin, the whites of their eyes, and the inside of their mouth look yellow.

Bilirubin is made naturally in the body, when red blood cells that aren't needed any more are broken down. Usually, the liver changes the bilirubin into a form the body can get rid of as waste. But sometimes the liver can't process all the bilirubin the body makes. When that happens bilirubin builds up in the body and makes the skin and the whites of the eyes look yellow.

Most babies with jaundice won't need any treatment, as their jaundice will go away on its own in a week or two. During this time, parents are advised to be watchful for changes to their baby's jaundice and behaviour, and to have regular checks with their doctor.

It's also important that parents make sure their baby stays well hydrated by providing regular, on-demand feeding. Having enough fluids will help the baby's body break down the extra bilirubin that is causing the jaundice.

Breast milk is the best first food for most babies. But, sometimes, something in the breast milk is thought to cause a baby's jaundice (this is called 'breast milk jaundice'). If this is the case, your doctor may recommend using formula instead of breast milk for a short time to improve the jaundice.

If your baby's bilirubin level is especially high or increasing, your doctor will recommend having treatment. The main options are light treatment and exchange transfusion.

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Light treatment (phototherapy)

Light treatment, also known as phototherapy, is a simple treatment that works well to get rid of jaundice.

To have light treatment, babies are usually put in a cot with special lights over their body. The lights help the baby's body process the extra bilirubin in their blood. The baby's eyes are covered with a mask to stop the light hurting them. Most babies need about one or two days of light treatment.

Light treatment has very few side effects, although there's a chance your baby could become too warm or dehydrated, or get a skin rash or a tan.

Another form of phototherapy is called fibre-optic light treatment. For this treatment, your baby is wrapped in or placed on a blanket made of material that contains optical fibres. Light shines down these fibres. Sometimes regular and fibre-optic light treatment are used at the same time.

Exchange transfusion

If light treatment hasn't helped your baby, or the level of bilirubin in your baby's blood is rising very rapidly, doctors may do an exchange transfusion.

During this treatment some of your baby's blood is taken out and replaced with blood from a donor. This is the fastest way to reduce bilirubin levels. The transfusion may need to be done again, depending on how much bilirubin remains in your baby's body.

Exchange transfusion can occasionally cause some serious side effects, such as internal bleeding. But if your baby is healthy, apart from having jaundice, they are very unlikely to be harmed by having an exchange transfusion.

For more background information on jaundice in newborn babies see our leaflet *Jaundice in newborn babies: what is it?*

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