

JAUNDICE

**SAINT BARNABAS MEDICAL CENTER
NEONATAL INTENSIVE CARE UNIT**

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is the yellow color to the skin that is often seen in the first few days after birth. The yellow color is due to the bilirubin level in the blood. In medical terms, jaundice is referred to as hyperbilirubinemia.

What is bilirubin?

Bilirubin is produced when red blood cells are broken down by the body. Normally, bilirubin is processed in the liver and excreted through the intestine so it can come out in the stool.

Why do babies have jaundice?

The red blood cells of babies don't live as long as red blood cells in adults, therefore babies' bodies are breaking down more red blood cells which produce more bilirubin. Also, if the baby has bruising at the time of birth, this may cause a large number of red blood cells to be broken down. All of these broken down red blood cells must be processed by the baby's liver. Premature babies do not have fully developed organs yet so the liver of these infants cannot process the bilirubin very quickly. Also, their intestines may not move much in the first few days after birth, especially if they are sick and not being fed, therefore, they don't make much stool.

Is bilirubin bad?

Small or moderate increases in bilirubin are not harmful. Extremely high levels of bilirubin can be harmful, even causing brain damage. Your baby's bilirubin will be measured to make sure that his/her levels do not become too high.

How is jaundice treated?

If the bilirubin is high enough to need treatment, it is usually treated with phototherapy. This means that the undressed baby is placed under special lights, or on a light producing blanket. The light helps break down the bilirubin in the skin. It may also cause the baby to have loose stools.

Why are my baby's eyes covered?

It is not good for babies to have bright light continuously shining in their eyes. The eyes are covered to protect them from the light of the phototherapy treatment.

How long will my baby have jaundice?

It varies from baby to baby. Bilirubin levels usually increase over the first several days of life and then decrease slowly. Phototherapy is usually needed for a few days, but could be needed for more than a week. Babies receiving breast milk may be yellow longer than babies receiving formula.

What happens if my baby's bilirubin rises to dangerous levels?

It is very uncommon for premature babies to need any treatment other than phototherapy. However, if a baby's bilirubin gets close to harmful levels, the doctor will discuss other treatments with you.

If you have any questions, please ask your nurse or doctor.