

Prolonged jaundice

Information and advice for parents and carers

Paediatrics

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is the medical term for when a baby's skin has a yellow appearance. The yellowing can also be seen in the whites of their eyes. Jaundice affects 6 out of 10 babies who were born after 37 weeks of pregnancy (full-term) and 8 out of 10 babies who were born before 37 weeks of pregnancy (premature).

Jaundice usually disappears without treatment by 10 – 14 days old, but this can take up to 3 weeks in premature babies.

What is prolonged jaundice?

Prolonged jaundice is when the yellowness of your baby's skin and the whites of their eyes doesn't fade after 2 weeks in a full-term baby, and after 3 weeks in a premature baby. Prolonged jaundice is usually harmless, but can be a sign of a serious liver problem.

What are the symptoms of jaundice and prolonged jaundice?

The symptoms of jaundice are:

- The skin looking slightly yellow, a bit like a sun-tan. In babies with dark skin, the yellowing can be noticed more easily on the soles of their feet, their palms and/or inside their mouth.
- The whites of the eyes being yellow.

Most babies with jaundice do not have any other symptoms but some may also:

- Have dark urine (wee)
- Have pale stools (poo) instead of yellow or green
- Be excessively sleepy
- Not be feeding well

What causes jaundice?

Most cases of jaundice are caused by the baby's liver not being able to work fast enough when they are born. One of the functions of the liver is to remove bilirubin from the blood. Bilirubin is a yellow chemical that is made when red blood cells that are no longer needed are broken down. Because newborn babies have more red blood cells than older children and these cells don't last as long, newborns make more bilirubin and their liver cannot process it all. This means that bilirubin builds up in their blood and causes jaundice.

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What causes prolonged jaundice?

Prolonged jaundice can be caused by:

- A condition where the red blood cells break down more quickly than normal. However, this is usually recognised during pregnancy or very soon after birth.
- An infection or other illness.
- A problem with your baby's thyroid gland.
- A liver problem, but this is rare.

Babies who are breastfed often stay jaundiced for longer than bottle-fed babies. If this is the case, the jaundice will fade with time and the baby should continue to be breastfed.

How is prolonged jaundice diagnosed?

Your midwife, health visitor or GP can diagnose prolonged jaundice by looking at your baby's skin and eyes in a well-lit room. They will then refer your baby to the hospital doctors to investigate the cause of their prolonged jaundice. This is what will happen at the hospital:

- You will be asked questions about your pregnancy, your baby's birth and your baby has been feeding.
- Your baby will be weighed.
- You will be asked about the colour of your baby's stools (poo) and urine (wee).
- You will be asked if any of your baby's relatives have had jaundice.
- Your baby will have a blood test to check for any infection, thyroid problem or liver problem. For this, a needle will be put into the back of your baby's hand and a small amount of their blood will be taken. You can feed your baby during this to comfort them.
- A sample of your baby's urine will be taken and tested for infection.

What happens next?

The results of the tests will be reviewed by a doctor and one of two things will happen:

1. If the results are ok we will send them to you and your baby's GP by post. If your baby is still jaundiced at 6 weeks old please take them to their GP as they will need to be referred back to the hospital doctor for more tests.

or

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2. If the results suggest that your baby has an infection or any other problem we will contact you by phone to tell you this. If this is the case your baby may need to have more blood tests, an ultrasound scan of his/her liver and treatment if they need it. We will also send a letter explaining this to you, your baby's GP and your health visitor.

How is prolonged jaundice treated?

The treatment for prolonged jaundice depends on what is causing the jaundice. If breastfeeding is the cause of your baby's prolonged jaundice then your baby will not need treatment and their jaundice will disappear with time.

If a liver or thyroid problem is the cause of your baby's prolonged jaundice then he/she will need to see a specialist for treatment.

Can prolonged jaundice be prevented?

No, prolonged jaundice cannot be prevented.

Contact details

If you have any questions or concerns about your baby's condition, please speak to your midwife, health visitor or GP.

Further information

You can find more information about jaundice on:

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Jaundice-newborn

Yellow Alert

www.yellowalert.org

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our websites www.swbh.nhs.uk and www.swbhengage.com, follow us on Twitter @SWBHnhs and like us on Facebook www.facebook.com/SWBHnhs.

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Sources used for the information in this leaflet

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, CG98 'Neonatal jaundice', May 2010

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5420 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



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