



Newborn Jaundice

Why is the liver important?

The liver is the second largest organ in your body and is located under your rib cage on the right side. It weighs about three pounds in the adult and is shaped like a football that is flat on one side.

The liver performs many jobs in your body. It processes what you eat and drink into energy and nutrients your body can use. The liver also removes harmful substances from your blood.

What is jaundice?

Jaundice is the yellowing of the skin and eyes. It results from having too much bilirubin in the blood. Bilirubin is a yellow substance made from the breakdown of red blood cells.

Most newborns develop jaundice. Jaundice in newborns is usually mild and goes away within one to two weeks. However, babies with jaundice need to be regularly seen by a doctor because severe jaundice can cause brain damage.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that every newborn be checked for jaundice before leaving the hospital and three to five days after birth.

What causes jaundice in newborns?

Jaundice usually occurs in newborns because their livers are not fully developed. Some other medical conditions that make newborn jaundice worse are:

- Baby's blood type does not match with his or her mother's blood type
- Baby is born with too many red blood cells (polycythemia)
- Baby has an infection in his or her blood (sepsis)
- Baby has bruises from birth
- Baby swallowed blood during birth
- Baby's mother has diabetes

Are some newborns more likely to have jaundice?

Jaundice can occur in babies of any gender, race, or ethnicity. However, certain risk factors increase a newborn's chance of having jaundice:

- Premature birth
- East Asian or Mediterranean ethnicity
- Sibling who had jaundice
- Feeding difficulties
- Breast-feeding

What are the symptoms of jaundice in newborns?

Jaundice often appears in newborns on the second or third day after birth. Newborn jaundice progresses in the following pattern of severity. Stage 1 is the least severe.

- Stage 1: jaundice in baby's face, especially the eyes

- Stage 2: jaundice in baby's arms and chest
- Stage 3: jaundice in baby's thighs
- Stage 4: jaundice in baby's legs and palms of hands

What are the complications of newborn jaundice?

If the newborn's jaundice is very severe and is not treated, it can cause permanent damage to a baby's brain. However in most newborns, jaundice is temporary and causes no harm.

When does a newborn with jaundice need to be seen by a doctor?

Jaundice usually is noticed in the first days of life. If the jaundice continues or increases after the baby leaves the hospital, the baby should be seen again by a doctor.

How is newborn jaundice diagnosed?

Newborn jaundice is diagnosed by a doctor examining the baby and by blood tests.

How is newborn jaundice treated?

The severity of the newborn's jaundice will determine if and what type of treatment is needed:

Mild

If the baby has mild levels of jaundice, it usually goes away on its own. Plenty of fluids of frequent feedings can help make the jaundice go away. If poor breastfeeding is the cause of the jaundice, switching to formula temporarily may help.

Moderate

If the baby has moderate levels of jaundice, a doctor may recommend phototherapy. During phototherapy, the baby is placed under a special light and wears goggles. The light helps the liver remove bilirubin in the baby's body.

Severe

If the baby has very severe jaundice and other treatments do not work, a doctor may recommend an exchange transfusion. In this treatment, the baby's blood is exchanged with donated blood to remove bilirubin from the blood. Only certain hospitals can perform exchange transfusions.