



Why is my baby yellow?

Understanding jaundice in the newborn

What is jaundice :

Jaundice is the yellow color seen on the skin of many newborns. Most of the time, jaundice remains at low levels and is normal. Babies get rid of jaundice over time by drinking milk and having wet and dirty diapers. However, a small percent of babies produce too much jaundice. High levels of jaundice, if not treated, can be very serious and cause brain damage.

Causes of jaundice :

Jaundice is caused by a yellow substance called bilirubin. Bilirubin is formed when the baby's red blood cells are broken down. During pregnancy, the mother's body helps the baby eliminate bilirubin. But after birth, the baby's liver must remove the bilirubin on its own. Sometimes, the baby's body makes bilirubin faster than what the liver can eliminate. When this happens, the rest of the bilirubin stays in the baby's blood and starts giving the skin a yellow color.

How common is jaundice :

About 6 out of 10 babies will have jaundice (60%). Although all babies can get jaundice, some babies are more at risk. These include :

- Babies born preterm (before 37 weeks)
- Babies that are born with bruises
- Babies who's brother or sister needed to have treatment for jaundice
- Babies who's mothers have a Rh negative or O blood type
- Babies with Asian or Aboriginal ethnicity

How do I know if my baby has jaundice?

For clients who stay at the hospital for 24h after having a baby, bilirubin testing is routinely done on your baby before going home.

For clients who have homebirths or leave the hospital before 24h, your midwife will offer routine bilirubin testing, which will involve going to the hospital. However, your midwife will be assessing your baby's jaundice levels at each postpartum visit. If your midwife is concerned about your baby's color of behaviour at any of those visits, she will discuss her findings with you and will highly recommend bilirubin testing at that point.

How is jaundice treated?

For most babies, jaundice levels stay normal and is eliminated by feeding and having wet and dirty diapers. This is why it is important for parents to monitor the baby's output (pee's and poop's) every day.

High levels of jaundice are treated with 'phototherapy' (when the baby is placed under a special light). The goal of phototherapy is to quickly reduce the levels of jaundice in your baby's blood. While under phototherapy, baby's wear their diaper and small sunglasses to protect their eyes from the lights.



When do I call my midwife?

Signs that a baby is getting sick from high levels of jaundice include :

- A baby who is not feeding well or not waking up to feed
- Lethargic baby (Baby who sleeps all the time and cannot be woken up)
- Baby who stops having wet or dirty diapers

If you notice that your baby has any of these symptoms, it is important to page your midwife as soon as possible at 1-800-380-9672