

# Fast Facts



- Untreated jaundice can cause brain damage.
- Newborns should be checked for jaundice before leaving the hospital and again within 48 hours after hospital discharge.
- Jaundice is the number one reason babies are readmitted to the hospital.
- 1 in 10 babies has jaundice that may require treatment.



## Selected Sources and More Resources

- “FAQs About Kernicterus,” from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): <http://www.cdc.gov/jaundice>
- “Questions and Answers About Jaundice and Your Newborn,” from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP): <http://www.aap.org/family/jaundicefaq.htm>
- “Information for Parents,” from PICK (Parents of Infants and Children with Kernicterus): <http://www.pickonline.org/resource/2>
- Educational video from PICK (Parents of Infants and Children with Kernicterus): <http://www.pickonline.org/resource/4>



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# Fast Facts for families



**What You  
Should Know About  
Jaundice Management**

## What You Should Know About Jaundice Management

**Any baby can get jaundice. But severe jaundice that is not treated can cause brain damage. Your baby should be checked for jaundice in the hospital and again within 48 hours after leaving the hospital. Ask your doctor or nurse about a jaundice bilirubin test.**

### What is jaundice?

Jaundice is caused when there is too much of a natural substance called bilirubin (pronounced *billy-rooben*) in the blood. Jaundice can make your baby's skin and the whites of the eyes look yellow, but it is not easy to see jaundice in all babies. Jaundice affects babies of all races and ethnicities. The best way to tell if your baby has jaundice is with a jaundice bilirubin test.

### Why do babies develop jaundice?

All of us have some bilirubin in our blood. Before birth, a mother's liver gets rid of bilirubin for the baby. After birth the baby's liver takes over. Sometimes it takes a few days for the baby's liver to work well, and the baby may develop jaundice during this time.



### Are some babies more at risk?

All babies can get jaundice, but which babies are more likely to develop jaundice?

- Babies born preterm (before 37 weeks)
- Babies bruised during birth
- Babies with a brother or sister who had newborn jaundice
- Babies whose mothers are Rh negative and/or have type O blood
- Babies with Middle Eastern, East Asian, or Mediterranean ethnicity

Be sure to talk to your doctor or nurse if your baby has any of these risks, and ask about a jaundice bilirubin test.



### How can I tell if my baby has jaundice?

Ask about a jaundice bilirubin test before you leave the hospital. The best way to measure bilirubin is by having a sample of your baby's blood taken. Your doctor or nurse will compare results from your baby's jaundice bilirubin test to what is normal for a baby the same age (in hours). Some hospitals also use a special tool that can measure bilirubin when it is held to the baby's skin. Bilirubin levels are usually the highest when your baby is 3 to 5 days old.

### Are there any signs of jaundice that I can see?

Some babies with jaundice might look yellow or even orange, but it is not possible to see jaundice in all babies, especially those with darker skin color. Talk to your doctor or nurse immediately if your baby:

- Has fewer than 4 wet or dirty diapers in 24 hours
- Has trouble nursing or sucking from a bottle
- Is very sleepy and hard to wake, even to feed
- Cannot be comforted, has a shrill and high-pitched cry, or both
- Is limp or floppy

### What is kernicterus?

Kernicterus is a type of brain damage that can result when jaundice is not treated properly. A child with kernicterus can have cerebral palsy, hearing loss, problems with vision and teeth, and sometimes mental retardation. Kernicterus can be prevented if jaundice is properly treated.

### How is jaundice treated?

Your baby might be put under special blue lights (phototherapy) to lower the bilirubin level. **You should not put your baby in direct sunlight; this is not a safe treatment for jaundice and could cause sunburn.** A baby with a very high bilirubin level might need a blood transfusion in the hospital.

### What else can I do to keep my jaundiced baby healthy?

Take jaundice seriously and stick to the follow-up plan for appointments and recommended care. Make sure your baby is getting enough to eat. The process of removing waste also removes bilirubin in your baby's blood. If you are breastfeeding, you should nurse the baby at least 8 to 12 times a day for the first few days. This will help you make enough milk for the baby and will help keep the baby's bilirubin level down. If you are having trouble breastfeeding, ask your doctor, nurse, or a lactation coach for help.

