# Newborn Jaundice: Information for Parents

When an infant’s skin has a yellowish or orange color, this is known as *jaundice*. Jaundice occurs when red blood cells are broken down, giving the baby’s skin a yellowish color. Bilirubin is a pigment that is released from the red blood cells. The liver helps break down the bilirubin so it can be removed from the body in the stool, but when the rate of breakdown exceeds the rate of elimination, it leads to buildup of bilirubin. Sometimes special lights are used on infants whose levels are high. This is called *phototherapy*. These lights work by helping to break down bilirubin in the skin. The infant is placed under artificial light in a crib or isolette and will wear only a diaper and special eye shades to protect the eyes. Treatment can last 1 to 2 days and further testing called a bilirubin test will be done. Babies who were born early, bruised during delivery, or have a different blood type from their mothers have a higher risk of getting jaundice. Jaundice becomes harmful when the level of bilirubin in the blood is very high.

The only way to know the level of bilirubin in the blood is to test the baby’s blood. Even if a test is normal, the bilirubin level can sometimes rise. When a baby is sent home, a follow-up appointment with your baby’s provider will be made. This appointment will help decide if an additional bilirubin test is needed.

If your baby is more mature and able to feed normally, it is important to feed your baby every 2–3 hours. Frequent feedings will help your baby poop more often so that the bilirubin is removed from his or her body. You can check for jaundice by pressing a fingertip on your baby’s nose, cheek, or forehead. When you remove your fingertip, the pressed area should look lighter for a few seconds before turning pink. If the area is yellow after your fingertip is removed, this shows that your baby has jaundice. This process can be repeated on the upper chest and tummy area. Jaundice starts in the face, moves down to the tummy area, and then spreads to the legs and feet.





Look for signs that show your baby’s bilirubin might be too high, including fussiness, stiffness in arms or legs, arching of the neck or back, high-pitched cries, or sleepiness. Phototherapy is used to prevent your baby’s bilirubin from rising. The light waves in phototherapy change the bilirubin in skin to a substance that is easily removed in the urine or stool. If your baby is under the lights, it is important to keep his or her eyes covered (to protect him or her from the light) and have as much skin exposed as possible. Phototherapy is safe and can sometimes be done at home.