

Newborn Jaundice

A Guide for Patients/Families



This brochure provides information about jaundice in new born babies, its causes, signs, symptoms and treatment. It is designed to respond to the questions parents frequently ask.



آغا خان یونیورسٹی ہسپتال، کراچی

The Aga Khan University Hospital, Karachi



Neonatal Jaundice

What is Jaundice?

Jaundice is a term used to describe yellow discolouration of the skin and eyes. It is caused by bilirubin produced from the breakdown of haemoglobin after birth. Jaundice is fairly common in newborns and, in most cases, it is a normal occurrence in the first week after birth. In most instances, newborn infants become jaundiced by 2-3 days of age and recover by 10 days of age.

What are the Causes of Jaundice?

Jaundice occurs because of change in the blood of the newborn infant. Before birth, the baby has high levels of a special type of haemoglobin (the oxygen carrying substance in the red blood cells). This type of haemoglobin is no longer needed after birth and the red blood cells of the newborn baby are replaced by normal haemoglobin after birth. Such breakdown of haemoglobin after birth produces a waste product called bilirubin which produces the yellow discolouration of the skin called jaundice. Bilirubin can be measured in the baby's blood through a simple test which tells us if the jaundice is mild, moderate or severe.

What are the Consequences of Jaundice?

Although a mild degree of jaundice is normal after birth, high levels of jaundice may be dangerous, especially in premature or sick newborn infants and may produce complications. In rare cases, high levels of jaundice (indicated by high levels of bilirubin) may produce a form of brain damage known as kernicterus.

Babies at Risk of having High Bilirubin Level (Severe Jaundice):

- Babies in whom jaundice was not diagnosed early;
- Premature babies (born before 37 completed weeks of pregnancy);
- Those with feeding difficulties in the first few days;
- Previous history of severe jaundice in another baby of the same parent;
- Those with a special problem or mismatch between the blood groups of mother and baby;
- Babies with any kind of infection;
- Jaundiced babies who do not receive timely treatment and follow up.

How can Moderate to Severe Jaundice be Treated?

The most common treatment for newborn jaundice is Photo therapy. This is usually provided through special lights that convert the type of bilirubin in the blood to the relatively less dangerous form of bilirubin. The baby may need to be placed under photo therapy light to lower the bilirubin to levels which are relatively safer.

Initially, this therapy starts with a single light. If required, more than one phototherapy unit may be used for the baby with additional intravenous fluids as there are chances of dehydration under photo therapy.

Note:

When the baby is under the light, it is important to cover his/her eyes to protect them from very bright light exposure and possible damage. When the baby's eyes are covered, it is especially important that the baby hears your voice and feels your touch. It is important to continue breast feeding your child during photo therapy unless specifically told not to.

- In rare instances, if the baby does not respond to photo therapy or if the bilirubin levels are dangerously high, then the baby may need an immediate change of blood to remove the dangerous bilirubin from the body. This is called an exchange transfusion.

How Long is the usual Treatment for Jaundice?

In most instances of jaundice requiring treatment, the bilirubin levels reduce to normal levels with photo therapy and the jaundice fades by the 7th to 10th day. In a few instances, jaundice may take longer to fade and sometimes several weeks. This may be especially seen in breast-feed babies, but despite the yellow discoloration, the jaundice levels are not dangerously high and the baby continues to feed well and grow. This does not require treatment.

Note:

- Follow the discharge instructions given by the nurse/doctor.
- If any slips for blood test of your baby are given to you at discharge, please remember to get these done as directed.
- In most cases, jaundice will resolve within 10 days. If it persists beyond 10 days, then the baby needs a proper checkup with your paediatrician.
- At home, if your baby looks abnormally pale/yellow, come for a checkup without delay.
- If the baby remains jaundiced and the stools are white or clay colored, please see your doctor.

For Further Information, Please call:

Paediatric Ward

Aga Khan University Hospital,
Karachi.

Phone: 3493 0051, Ext: 4090-91

Section of Emergency Medicine

Aga Khan University Hospital,
Karachi.

Phone: 3493 0051, Ext: 1090-91