

Pediatric Pointers

by Dr. Joey Bell, Pembroke Pediatrics

New parents always have lots of questions to ask after the birth of a new baby boy or girl (and so do the grandparents of course!). One of the most common questions I get asked in the nursery is about baby jaundice, commonly called "yellow jaundice".

Baby jaundice is a condition caused by the breakdown of red blood cells in the baby's circulatory system after birth. These broken down cells are usually taken care of by the liver and excreted out the bladder or intestines. In the newborn, however, the liver is not very mature and cannot handle all the cell products and they begin to build up in the bloodstream. This buildup causes the skin to take on a yellowish color, thus the name "yellow jaundice". As the liver gets more mature, it better handles red cell products and jaundice usually does not recur.

When I speak to parents before they leave the nursery with their newborn, I remind them that a little jaundice is not uncommon during the first week of life. Usually mild jaundice will resolve itself naturally by the seventh day of life. There are some conditions that may prolong or worsen baby jaundice. Breast-fed babies usually have higher levels of jaundice than bottle-fed babies, but usually not enough to harm the infant. (Remember, breast-feeding is the best nutrition for a baby!) Occasionally, a difference in blood types between the non and baby will cause a more severe form of jaundice. Rarely, and infant will be born with a blood disorder that will raise the jaundice level.

If a baby has mild yellowing of the skin during the first week of life, simple observation will do. You can help mild jaundice go away faster by placing the unclothed baby in sunlight that is coming through a closed window. Remember to protect the eyes by covering them with a rolled up washcloth. If the skin becomes a bright yellow or if the jaundice persists or appears after the first week, see your doctor to rule out any serious problems.

Well, that's jaundice in a nutshell. We'll talk again next week!

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