

Prolonged Jaundice in Babies

Child Health Information

Thank you for coming to the Children's Outpatients (B11) for us to investigate your baby's jaundice.

Jaundice is the yellow colouring of skin and eyes. It is a common condition in babies. It is usually harmless and goes away by itself. Occasionally jaundice is due to important illnesses so babies with it usually need to have some tests.



Why is my baby jaundiced?

Most jaundice in newborn babies is part of a normal body process. Jaundice happens because the liver has to break down old red blood cells. This process produces a yellow waste product called bilirubin.

Because a new-born baby's liver is immature it can't get rid of bilirubin quickly. The bilirubin therefore appears in the whites of the eyes and skin which makes them appear yellow. In the first few days of life this sometimes needs treatment with phototherapy (blue light).

Once the liver matures the jaundice goes away, usually with a couple of weeks. If a baby remains jaundiced beyond 14 days of age (21 days for premature babies) it is termed 'prolonged'. Tests are then needed to rule out rare but important causes of jaundice such as liver disease or some blood conditions.

What needs to be done?

In the jaundice clinic we will ask you some questions about your baby's feeding, behaviour and general well-being. You will also be asked about the colour of your baby's urine and stools. If your baby's urine is yellow (rather than colourless) or the stools are pale or white this can indicate liver disease and it is important to tell the doctor about this.

Your baby will be examined and if jaundice is present blood tests will be required. These blood tests will look at the total amount of bilirubin and the proportion of the bilirubin called 'conjugated bilirubin' (also called a 'split' bilirubin). It is the level of conjugated bilirubin which is particularly important in deciding if there may be any important cause for the jaundice.

Further blood tests (usually on the same blood sample) may be ordered depending on what the doctor has found out from the questions and examination.

Breast milk jaundice

Babies who are breast fed are much more likely to have jaundice which continues beyond the first week of life. It is thought that certain factors in the milk block proteins in the liver that break down bilirubin. This is called breast-milk jaundice and is harmless. It is not a reason to stop breast feeding and will settle by itself over a few weeks.

Even if a baby is breast fed it is still important to screen for other causes of prolonged jaundice.

What happens next?

- If your baby is well and there are no other concerns you can go straight home from the clinic. We will call you with the blood results.
- If you have not heard from us within three working days please call the Children's Outpatients department on 01225 824203 and someone will call you back. Please ensure that you give us a contact telephone number on which we can easily contact you.
- Most of the babies we see will have reassuring blood tests and are diagnosed as having breast milk jaundice. This should settle over a few weeks. If your baby has breast milk jaundice but it has not gone by 6-8 weeks, or if you feel it is getting worse, or your baby develops pale stools, tell your GP or health visitor as we will want to see you again.
- In some cases you may be required to return for your baby to have a repeat blood test to confirm the results. This appointment is arranged when we contact you with the results.
- A very small number of babies will have results which need further investigation arranging such as more blood tests or ultrasound scans. These will usually be done with a day or two. The doctor who contacts you with the results will be able to discuss this in more detail.

If you have any questions do not hesitate to ask the medical and nursing staff in the children's department. Your health visitor and GP will also be able to discuss any queries you have.

Further information:

The Children's Liver Disease Foundation charity has information on their website www.childliverdisease.org or telephone 0121 2124300

The Children's Outpatients Staff can be contact if you have queries about your appointment or results on 01225 824203.