

Jaundice (icterus) in newborn babies

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Your child has jaundice and will be or is already being treated with phototherapy.

This folder has more information about:

- Icterus (jaundice);
- Treating jaundice with phototherapy

If you have any questions after reading this folder, you can always ask your doctor or nurse.

The meaning of icterus

Icterus or neonatal jaundice is common in newborns. It causes a yellow discolouration of the skin and the whites of the eyes. This is caused by a buildup of bilirubin (released during the breakdown of red blood cells) in the skin.

Children have different red blood cells in the womb than outside the womb. When the child is born, their red blood cells are broken down and replaced. Waste products (bilirubin) are released and converted by the liver and excreted through the urine and stool.

In some cases, the liver is unable to break down the bilirubin fast enough, so it accumulates in the body and causes the yellow colour. The jaundice is usually visible 24 hours after birth and disappears after 1 to 2 weeks. Jaundice can cause your child to be drowsy and drink poorly.

Jaundice is not a disease but a phenomenon.

In newborns, jaundice is usually a harmless phenomenon, so your child is probably just as healthy as those without yellow skin discolouration.

In rare cases, neonatal jaundice can be caused by congenital liver disease.

Further examination is usually needed if neonatal jaundice has not disappeared after 2 weeks or a child is drowsy and drinks poorly.

Diagnosing jaundice

When the skin and whites of the eyes are yellow and the urine is darker than normal, jaundice will be considered.

The bilirubin level will be determined through blood tests. The blood is taken by means of a heel prick. If the bilirubin level is higher than a certain value (depending on your child's birth weight and age), the doctor will start phototherapy.

The information in this brochure is general in nature and is intended to give you an idea of the care and guidance you can expect. In your own situation, other advice or procedures may apply. This brochure is therefore only an addition to the specific (verbal) information from your specialist or practitioner.

Possible consequences of untreated icterus

If jaundice is left untreated and the bilirubin level in the blood exceeds certain limits, it can cause damage to the brain and nervous system. This is called kernicterus and is, fortunately, very rare.

The treatment: phototherapy

For phototherapy, your child is usually placed in an incubator under a blue lamp. The special light changes the bilirubin in the skin into a form that can be more easily excreted through the urine and stool. When the bilirubin is excreted, the bilirubin level in the blood decreases and the degree of jaundice decreases.

Your child will generally be placed in the incubator wearing only a nappy to maximize the effect of the lamp. Your child's eyes will be covered by cloth glasses, as the lamp is very bright. However, the lamp is **not** harmful to the eyes.

While your child is receiving phototherapy, the bilirubin level in the blood will be checked regularly (usually daily) to see if the phototherapy can be stopped. This blood is also taken by means of a heel prick.

After phototherapy has stopped, the bilirubin level in the blood may be checked once or twice more to make sure it does not rise again.

Phototherapy treatment usually lasts several days.

Your child's experience

Phototherapy is not harmful or painful to your child.

The care

For a good result, your child must remain under the lamp as much as possible. As such, your child will be cared for and fed by the nurses in the incubator while the lamp is switched on.

When you come to care for and feed your child, they can be removed from the incubator unless their bilirubin level is too high. The aim is to put your child back in the incubator as soon as possible after feeding and caring for them. You can of, course, put your hands in the incubator to caress your child, etc.

We will pay attention to the following aspects when caring for your child (you are welcome to participate in the care):

- we will take your baby's temperature regularly because of the heat emission from the lamp;
- we will monitor urine production;
- we will administer sufficient fluids (drinks);
- we will clean the buttocks with care. The effect of the light on the intestines can cause diarrhea, which means that your child may suffer from red, irritated buttocks. Do not wipe the buttocks with baby oil, the lamp can cause this to burn into the skin. It is best to clean the buttocks with wet gauze.

Questions

If you have any questions after reading this folder, you can always contact the nurses and doctors on the ward.