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Jaundice and your newborn baby

Neonatal Service/ Children's Hospital

Information for Patients

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What is neonatal jaundice?

Jaundice is a yellowing of a newborn baby's skin and the whites of their eyes. It is common and usually harmless. It typically clears up on its own within 10 to 14 days. Most babies do not need treatment.

However, some babies can develop very high jaundice levels. If not treated, these high levels can cause harm to the brain. A healthcare professional can easily assess your baby if you are concerned.

Why does it happen?

- **Blood cells:** Babies are born with extra red blood cells. When they leave the womb, their bodies start to break these down.
- **Bilirubin:** Breaking down these cells creates a yellow pigment (colouring) called bilirubin.
- **The liver:** Usually, the liver clears bilirubin out of the body through the baby's poo. Because newborn livers are still growing, they cannot always clear it fast enough. The extra yellow pigment builds up in their skin and eyes instead.

How is jaundice assessed?

1. **Skin test:** A healthcare professional will use a machine called a TCB (transcutaneous bilirubinometer) against your baby's skin. It gives an estimate right away of the jaundice level. This does not hurt your baby.
2. **Physical exam:** We will examine your baby under bright, natural light with their clothes removed.
3. **Feeding review:** A healthcare professional will check how feeding is going and offer support.
4. **Blood test referral:** If the skin test reading is high, your baby will be referred for a blood test.

Blood tests

If referred, your blood test will take place at either the **ANNP-led Jaundice Clinic** or the **Children's Emergency Department.** Your referrer will tell you exactly where to go.

Timing: Results are often available quickly, but you may need to wait up to 3 hours. We will show you to our parent’s lounge where you will be able to access the feeding room, toilets and baby change area while you wait.

How is it treated?

If your baby needs treatment, they will have **phototherapy** (light therapy). This uses a special blue light to break down the bilirubin so it can leave the body in their poo.

- **In the hospital:** Your baby lies in a warm incubator wearing only a nappy. This lets the blue light reach their skin. They wear a soft mask to protect their eyes from the bright light. They can come out for feeds.
- **At home:** If your baby is well and weighs over 2kg, they can use a light blanket that plugs into the wall. It wraps around the baby, so the blue light shines directly onto them. The blanket will be loaned to you by our homecare team, they will teach you how to use it, visit you at home to monitor baby and collect the blanket from you after treatment is finished.

Monitoring and support during treatment

- **Feeding support:** Available from ward staff or the neonatal home care team.
- **Blood monitoring:** Your baby will have regular blood tests to track bilirubin levels, check their blood type, and check for any maternal blood reactions.

What are the risks?

Phototherapy is safe. But if very severe jaundice is not treated, it can cause lasting damage to the brain.

Mild side effects: The light can sometimes cause a mild skin rash or make the baby's poo a bit watery. Tell your nurse if you notice this.

What happens next?

Phototherapy stops when your baby’s bilirubin level is safely below the level that needs treatment. Your baby will have another blood test **12 to 18 hours later.** This checks that the bilirubin level has not started to rise again. Some babies need another course of phototherapy.

What to look out for at home

Skin yellowing can be harder to see on darker skin tones. To check for jaundice:

- Look closely at the whites of your baby's eyes.
- Press lightly on your baby's skin to see if the skin looks yellow underneath when you lift your finger.
- If your baby remains jaundiced after 14 days or 21 days in babies born early (premature) they will be referred for some more tests in the prolonged jaundice clinic.

If you notice...	You need to…
Your baby seems more jaundiced or their yellowing is worsening.	Contact your **community midwife** or hospital ward staff right away.
Your baby **will not wake up**, is **floppy**, or **feels cold.**	**Call 999 immediately** for urgent medical emergency support.

Contact details

Community Midwives Office: **0116 258 6111**

Community office opening hours:

Monday to Friday, 9am to 4:15pm

Saturday and Sunday 8:30am to 11:45am

Outside of these hours if you are concerned about your baby's jaundice you should attend the children's emergency department.

Health information and support is available at www.nhs.uk or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice
Visit www.uhleicester.nhs.uk for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals.
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact uhl-tr.informationforpatientsmailbox@nhs.net

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