

Honeycomb Midwives Screening for Jaundice in your Newborn

What is Jaundice?

Jaundice means a high level of bilirubin levels in a person's body. Usually your liver gets rid of bilirubin, but a newborn baby's liver sometimes has a hard time getting rid of bilirubin in their blood. Another important way a newborn gets rid of bilirubin is through their poops.

Jaundice is very common in newborns – about 60% of all newborns get jaundiced in the first week of life. Most babies will deal with their jaundice on their own, and don't need any help. The high levels of bilirubin in newborns is caused by the breakdown of red blood cells that are no longer needed. Newborns make new red blood cells that are designed for the baby to get oxygen through the lungs instead of the placenta.

However, 2% of babies who get jaundiced can have very severe consequences. Untreated severe jaundice can cause permanent brain damage, including hearing loss, developmental delay, seizures or even death.

When bilirubin levels rise to an unhealthy level in a newborn a few things can happen:

- Your baby's skin can look yellow or orange from the bilirubin**
- Your baby may be very sleepy, and not want to feed**

This causes a cycle where the bilirubin goes up, the baby gets sleepier and feeds less, which results in fewer poops – and so the cycle starts again.

Is my baby at risk of jaundice?

Babies who are more likely to get jaundice are:

Male babies

Babies of Asian ethnicity

Premature babies (born before 37 weeks)

Babies who have a sibling that had severe jaundice

Babies who have increased bruising (usually on the head) from the birth

Vacuum assisted birth

Babies who are not breastfeeding well or are not getting enough formula

Babies whose mothers have a delay in breastmilk coming in or decreased milk supply

How can I tell if my baby is jaundiced?

The Canadian Paediatric Society and Alberta Health Services recommend that all newborns are screened for jaundice in the first 2 days of life. How yellow your baby's skin is does not always reflect how severe the jaundice level are. This screening can be done with a flashed light against your baby's skin if the baby is admitted to a postpartum unit and is at least 12 hrs old. If your baby is at home, your midwife can test for jaundice through a blood test (a poke on your baby's heel) during one of your home visits.

When to call your midwife

Please call the pager to speak with your midwife if:

- Your baby looks yellow or orange at any time before they are 24 hours old**
- Your baby is so sleepy that it is difficult to wake your baby**