

Understanding Jaundice



What is jaundice?

Jaundice is a word used to describe people with a yellowish colour to their skin and the whites of their eyes. It is caused by build-up of a chemical called bilirubin [bill-ee-ru-bin] in the blood. Everyone has some bilirubin in their body. But when the level is too high, known as hyperbilirubinemia, it may cause jaundice.

What causes infant jaundice?

Before birth, the mother's liver removes bilirubin for the baby. But after birth the baby's liver must remove it. Sometimes the baby's liver might not be developed enough to efficiently get rid of the bilirubin. Then the bilirubin builds up in the blood and causes jaundice.

How common is jaundice?

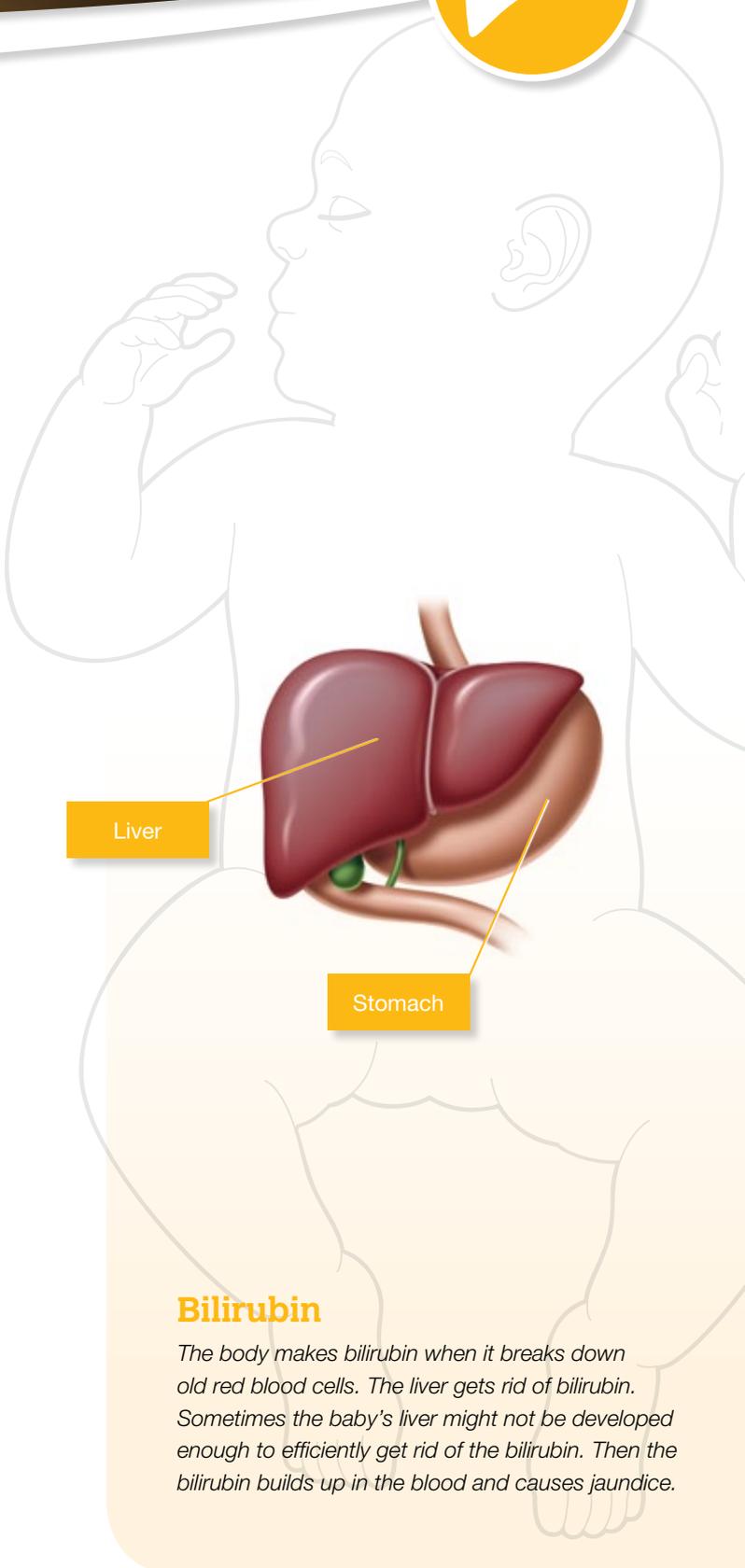
About six in ten babies have jaundice. In most of these newborns, bilirubin levels increase in the first few days after birth. As the infant feeds, the bilirubin levels usually decrease on their own.

What factors affect jaundice?

In some babies, the build-up of bilirubin is more serious. This may occur if the baby:

- Is premature
- Is not feeding well
- Has an infection
- Has bruising or bleeding inside
- Has a sibling who had jaundice
- Is of East Asian or Mediterranean descent
- Has a different blood type than their mother
This is often called an Rh/ABO incompatibility

These babies require close monitoring and early jaundice management.



Bilirubin

The body makes bilirubin when it breaks down old red blood cells. The liver gets rid of bilirubin. Sometimes the baby's liver might not be developed enough to efficiently get rid of the bilirubin. Then the bilirubin builds up in the blood and causes jaundice.

Treating Infant Jaundice

Does jaundice cause permanent problems?

The majority of jaundice cases are short-term and cause no lasting problems. In very severe and/or untreated cases, permanent health problems can occur. Early treatment can help prevent these problems.

What treatment will my baby receive?

- Mild cases of jaundice do not require any treatment. The bilirubin build-up often goes away within a week after birth
- Moderate cases of jaundice are most often treated with special lights. The treatment is called **phototherapy**. It helps the baby's body break down the extra bilirubin
 - **Are the lights safe?** Yes, phototherapy is safe and it works best when most of the baby's skin is exposed to the light. The baby will wear only a nappy and a soft mask to protect the eyes. To keep warm, the baby is often placed in a special bed or isolette
- If the jaundice is due to a blood-type difference between mother and baby, it may also be treated with medicine
- Severe cases of jaundice that do not respond to phototherapy or medicine are rare. In these cases, doctors may perform an **exchange blood transfusion**

What will happen next?

The majority of babies will respond well to treatment in a few days, however each baby responds differently. Some babies may require longer treatment. The healthcare team will talk with you about what is best for your baby.

Glossary

Bilirubin

a pigment produced from the breakdown of red blood cells

Exchange blood transfusion

a procedure in which doctors repeatedly remove small amounts of blood from the baby and replace it with equal amounts of donor blood

Hyperbilirubinaemia

build-up of a chemical called bilirubin in the body (may cause jaundice)

Phototherapy

using special lights to help the baby get rid of the bilirubin build-up that is causing jaundice

Rh/ABO incompatibility

difference in blood type between the mother and the baby. This can increase the risk or severity of jaundice

Ask the healthcare team when you have questions – they are there to help.

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