

**Caring for Your Child**  
**Hyperbilirubinemia and Jaundice**

***What is bilirubin?***

The body makes bilirubin when red blood cells get old and are broken down by the body. After bilirubin is broken down by the liver, it moves into the digestive tract. It leaves the body in bowel movements. It is hard for babies to get rid of the bilirubin, so it can build up in the blood, tissues and fluids of the baby's body. When there is too much bilirubin in the blood, it is a condition called hyperbilirubinemia.

***What is jaundice?***

Jaundice is a condition that causes your baby's skin to turn yellow in the first few days after birth. You may also notice that the sclera (white parts) of the baby's eyes are yellow. The yellow color of the skin and sclera in newborns with jaundice comes from a build-up of bilirubin.

Premature babies have a greater chance than full term babies of developing jaundice. Premature babies do not have a fully developed liver. They cannot process bilirubin quickly. Their intestines may not push much through in the first few days, especially if the baby is sick and is not being fed breast milk or formula.

***Is bilirubin bad?***

Small to medium increases in bilirubin will not hurt your baby. Very high levels of bilirubin can cause hearing loss, seizures and brain damage. If your baby has jaundice, we will monitor his bilirubin levels closely.

**Signs that bilirubin may be at a harmful level:**

- Yellow coloring of the skin, starting on the face and moving down the body.
- Poor feeding
- Increased sleepiness

***What is the treatment?***

Premature infants are usually treated with phototherapy. For this treatment, your baby would need to lie under special lights. The lights are not painful. To protect your baby's eyes, we will cover them while he is under the lights.

## **13:B:14**

### ***What happens if my baby's bilirubin level gets to a harmful level?***

If your baby's bilirubin gets close to harmful levels, the doctor may do an "exchange" blood transfusion. This transfusion removes the blood that contains bilirubin and replaces it with blood from the blood bank.

### ***How long will my baby have jaundice?***

Every baby is different. Bilirubin levels increase over the first few days of life, and then come down slowly. Some babies need phototherapy for a few days. Others need it for more than a week. Breastfed babies may stay yellow longer than formula fed babies.

Written 5/02  
Reviewed 12/5  
Revised 7/09

©The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia 2009. Not to be copied or distributed without permission. All rights reserved.  
Patient family education materials provide educational information to help individuals and families. You should not rely on this information as professional medical advice or to replace any relationship with your physician or healthcare provider.