

Jaundice

Jaundice is caused by an excess of bilirubin, a substance that is in the blood usually in very small amounts. In the newborn period, bilirubin can build up faster than it can be removed from the intestinal track. Jaundice can appear as a yellowing of the skin and eyes. It affects most newborns to some degree, appearing between the second and third day of life. The jaundice usually clears up by two weeks of age and is not harmful.

Two types of jaundice can affect breastfed infants —breastfeeding jaundice and breast milk jaundice.

- Breastfeeding jaundice can occur when a breastfeeding baby is not getting enough breast milk. This can happen either because of breastfeeding challenges or because the mother’s milk hasn’t yet come in. This is not caused by a problem with the breast milk itself.
- Breast milk jaundice may be caused by substances in the mother’s milk that prevents bilirubin from being excreted from the body. Such jaundice appears in some healthy, breastfed babies after about one week of age. It may last for a month or more and it is usually not harmful.

Your baby’s doctor may monitor your baby’s bilirubin level with blood tests. Jaundice is best treated by breastfeeding more frequently or for longer periods of time. It is crucial to have a health care provider help you make sure the baby is latching on and removing milk well. This is usually all that is needed for the infant’s body to rid itself of excess bilirubin.

Some babies will also need phototherapy — treatment with a special light. This light helps break down bilirubin into a form that can be removed from the body easily. If you are having trouble latching your baby to the breast, it is important that you pump or hand express to ensure a good milk supply. The same is true if the baby needs formula for a short time —pumping or hand expressing will make sure the baby has enough milk when you return to breastfeeding.

It is important to keep in mind that breastfeeding is best for your baby. Even if your baby experiences jaundice, this is not something that you caused. Your health care providers can help you make sure that your baby is eating well and that the jaundice goes away.