

Children's Health

Protecting Children From Possible Brain Damage

(NAPSA)—Learning more about a condition known as newborn jaundice may help parents protect children from possible brain damage.

A recent survey found that many Americans are not aware of the serious potential risks associated with newborn jaundice. More than 70 percent (71.9 percent) of respondents had never heard of kernicterus, a condition that results from brain damage caused when bilirubin levels get too high and go untreated. Bilirubin increases when red blood cells break down and a baby's liver is too immature to adequately get rid of excess bilirubin.

"Kernicterus is a devastating condition that can permanently change the lives of otherwise healthy babies," said Dr. José Cordero, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities. "Prevention is the key to keeping these babies healthy; ask your doctor or nurse about a bilirubin test. This simple blood test can be done soon after birth to see if your baby is at risk."

Because jaundice is so common, many parents are told not to worry, yet parents should not dismiss any signs of a high bilirubin level and should consult their baby's doctor. Putting a baby in sunlight is not recommended as an effective way to treat jaundice.

Among women of childbearing age, only 17 percent thought jaundice in a newborn baby could cause brain damage, whereas nearly 60 percent were not sure.

Jaundice is a common condition—occurring in about 60 percent of newborn babies. When a baby's bilirubin level is elevated,



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it can lead to a yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes. While not all jaundice leads to kernicterus, high levels of bilirubin can permanently damage the brain if not treated appropriately. Kernicterus is characterized by cerebral palsy, hearing loss, problems with vision and teeth, and in some cases, mental retardation.

Once a baby is discharged from the hospital after birth, parents need to be aware of any possible signs that might indicate jaundice. Parents should seek medical attention if their infant is overly sleepy, does not want to breast-feed or take a bottle, does not have at least four wet or dirty diapers daily, seems too awake, or has an overall change in behavior. If you notice the baby arching his or her back or neck, high-pitched crying, irritability, or strange eye movements, seek medical attention immediately.

CDC is a partner in the Kernicterus Prevention Partnership Campaign (KPPC). For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/jaundice.