

Most Parents Unaware of Possible Brain Damage from Untreated Jaundice



A majority of Americans are not aware of the serious potential risks associated with newborn jaundice, according to a recent survey. This national survey of nearly 5,000 Americans found that more than 70 percent (71.9 percent) of respondents polled 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 it is normal for some red blood cells to die every day. Sometimes a baby's liver is too immature to adequately get rid of excess bilirubin and jaundice develops.

Kernicterus is a devastating condition that can permanently change the lives of otherwise healthy babies. Prevention is the key to keeping these babies healthy; parents should ask their baby's doctor or nurse about a bilirubin test. This simple blood test can be done soon after birth to see if a baby is at risk.

Many parents are aware that jaundice is a potential threat, but relatively few are aware of how serious the threat is. Because jaundice is so common, many parents are told not to worry. Parents should not dismiss any signs of a high bilirubin level and should consult their baby's doctor. A bilirubin test is the best way to assess the baby's bilirubin level. Putting a baby in sunlight is not recommended as an effective way to treat jaundice.

Nearly two-thirds (59.9 percent) of all survey respondents reported that they were not sure if jaundice could cause brain damage in a newborn baby. Among women of childbearing age, only 17 percent thought jaundice in a newborn baby could cause brain damage, whereas nearly 60 percent of this group responded that they were not sure.

Jaundice is a common condition – occurring in about 60 percent of newborn babies – and is caused when a baby's liver cannot adequately remove excess bilirubin. When a baby's bilirubin level is elevated, 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 managed or 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 the progression of jaundice. Parents should seek medical attention if their infant is overly sleepy, does not want to breastfeed 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. There are also advanced warning signs that indicate your baby needs immediate treatment including arching of the back or neck, high-pitched crying, irritability, or strange eye movements. If you see any of these things, seek medical attention immediately.

CDC is a partner in the Kernicterus Prevention Partnership Campaign (KPPC), a collaboration between health care professionals, public health organizations, and consumer groups who have come together in an effort to raise awareness for and increase prevention of kernicterus. Through its efforts, the KPPC aims to eradicate kernicterus and ensure all babies have the opportunity to develop to their full potential. For more information about newborn jaundice and kernicterus, visit www.cdc.gov/jaundice.