

# Jaundice in Adults

## What is jaundice?

Jaundice (JAWN-dis) is when the skin turns yellow. It is caused by having too much of a chemical called bilirubin (bil-ih-RU-bin) in the body. Bilirubin comes from the normal breakdown of red blood cells. It is changed in the liver to a form that can leave the body in your stool. Jaundice happens when too much bilirubin is made in the blood or when the liver is damaged and cannot get rid of bilirubin from the body. Other than yellow skin, people with jaundice may have stomach pain, nausea, fever, weight loss, or itching. They may also notice that their stools turn a lighter color or their urine turns a darker color.

## Who gets it?

People get jaundice when their liver is damaged. There can be many causes:

- Liver infections, like hepatitis (hep-ah-TIE-tis)
- Drinking too much alcohol
- Gallstone disease
- Some medicines
- Cirrhosis (seh-RO-sis; a disease where liver tissue is slowly replaced by scar tissue, disrupting normal liver function)
- Cancer of the gallbladder or pancreas

In some cases, yellow skin is caused by other medical problems or by eating foods that have a lot of a chemical called beta-carotene (for example, melons, squash, and carrots).

## How can I tell if I have it?

See your doctor right away if your skin turns yellow. Your doctor can order blood tests to check for a high bilirubin level. Your doctor might also order tests like a CT scan or an ultrasound to take pictures of your liver.

## How is it treated?

It depends on what is causing the high bilirubin level. Usually, your doctor can treat the illness that is causing the jaundice.

## What can I expect?

If you have an infection, your symptoms will likely get better when the infection is gone. If you are taking medicine that bothers your liver, you will likely get better when you stop taking the medicine. If you have gallstones, you should get better after your gallbladder is removed. If you have long-standing liver disease, the jaundice may not get better.

## How can I prevent jaundice?

Some infections like hepatitis B and C can be passed by body fluids, such as semen and blood. As a result, you should use a condom during sex, and you should not share needles if you use IV drugs. You can help prevent alcoholic liver disease by having no more than two alcoholic drinks per day for men (for example, two beers, two glasses of wine, or two shots of liquor), or no more than 1 drink per day for women.



## Jaundice in Adults *(continued)*

### Where can I get more information about jaundice?

Your doctor

National Library of Medicine

<https://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/000210.htm>

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### Notes:

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**This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.**

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