

Overview

Jaundice is a clinical condition characterized by a yellowish discoloration of the skin, mucous membranes, and the whites of the eyes (sclera). It is not a disease itself, but rather a visible sign of an underlying medical condition. Jaundice occurs when there is an excess of bilirubin—a yellow pigment formed during the normal breakdown of red blood cells—in the blood. Normally, the liver filters bilirubin from the blood and sends it into the intestines; jaundice happens when this process is interrupted.

Symptoms

- **Yellowing:** The most obvious sign is a yellow tint to the skin and the whites of the eyes. This often starts at the head and moves down the body.
- **Dark Urine:** Urine may appear dark, brownish, or tea-colored because the kidneys are trying to filter out the excess bilirubin.
- **Pale Stools:** Stools may become clay-colored or very light if bile is not reaching the intestines.
- **Pruritus (Itching):** Many patients experience intense skin itching due to the buildup of bile salts.
- **Associated Signs:** Fatigue, abdominal pain (especially in the upper right side), nausea, vomiting, and unintended weight loss.

Causes

The causes of jaundice are typically categorized by where the problem occurs:

- **Pre-hepatic (Before the liver):** Conditions that cause red blood cells to break down too quickly, such as malaria, sickle cell anemia, or certain autoimmune disorders.
- **Hepatic (In the liver):** Liver damage or infection that prevents it from processing bilirubin. Common causes include Hepatitis (A, B, or C), Cirrhosis (often from alcohol use), and certain medications (like acetaminophen overdose).
- **Post-hepatic (After the liver):** A blockage in the bile ducts that prevents bile from draining into the intestines. This is often caused by gallstones, tumors (pancreatic or gallbladder), or inflammation of the bile ducts.

When to See a Doctor

Any instance of jaundice in an adult should be investigated by a medical professional immediately. **Urgent medical attention** is required if jaundice is accompanied by:

- Severe pain or tenderness in the abdomen.
- Fever and chills (which may indicate a dangerous bile duct infection).
- Changes in mental status, such as confusion or extreme sleepiness.
- Easy bruising or bleeding.

Home Remedies / Prevention Care

- **Liver-Friendly Diet:** Eat a balanced diet low in saturated fats and high in fiber to prevent gallstones.
- **Limit Alcohol:** Chronic alcohol consumption is a leading cause of liver damage; avoiding or limiting intake is essential for liver health.
- **Hepatitis Prevention:** Practice safe sex, avoid sharing needles, and get vaccinated for Hepatitis A and B.
- **Safe Medication Use:** Always follow dosage instructions for over-the-counter drugs, as many (like Tylenol) can be toxic to the liver in high doses.
- **Hydration and Rest:** While the body recovers from the underlying cause, staying hydrated and getting plenty of rest supports the liver's regenerative process.