Jaundice and Phototherapy

What is jaundice?
Jaundice is the yellow color seen in the skin of many newborns. It happens when a chemical called bilirubin builds up in the baby’s blood. It is normal for everyone to have low levels of bilirubin in their blood, which is removed by the liver. Before birth, the mother's liver does this for the baby. Most babies develop jaundice in the first few days after birth because it takes a few days for the baby's liver to get better at removing bilirubin.

Most babies have mild jaundice that is harmless, but in unusual situations the bilirubin level can get very high and might cause brain damage. When a baby’s bilirubin level is starting to get high, we start treatment before the level gets anywhere near that which is dangerous or can cause damage to the brain.

What is the treatment?
Phototherapy is the most common form of treatment for jaundice. This treatment is used for a few days until the liver is mature enough to handle the bilirubin on its own.

Feeding your baby every 2-3 hours is recommended to reduce the jaundice levels. If you are breastfeeding, supplementation may be recommended if the bilirubin will not come down with frequent feedings.

What is phototherapy?
Phototherapy involves exposing the skin to blue light. This light is absorbed into the skin, where it changes the bilirubin into a form that can be removed from the body. There are several ways to expose the baby including shining lights on the skin from above, using a blanket that wraps around the baby, or placing lights underneath the baby.

Are there side effects of using phototherapy?
Babies on any type of phototherapy treatment may have frequent and loose bowel movements that are sometimes greenish in color. This is normal since this is the way the body removes the bilirubin. Other common side effects are irritability, dehydration, or changes in body temperature. These will resolve quickly once the phototherapy is discontinued. There have been no demonstrated long-term effects from phototherapy.

How long will my baby need phototherapy?
The length of treatment depends on many factors. The cause of the baby’s jaundice plays a large role in how long he or she will need phototherapy. Most babies will respond quickly and will only need treatment for a few days.