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Risk Assessment And Follow-Up Protocols For Neonatal Jaundice To Prevent Severe Hyperbilirubinemia

Arzibekov Abdikadir Gulyamovich
Candidate of Medical Sciences, Associate Professor
Head of the Department of pediatrics of the Faculty of Medicine, ASMI

Abstract. Neonatal jaundice is common, but severe hyperbilirubinemia and bilirubin-induced neurologic dysfunction are largely preventable when risk assessment, bilirubin screening, and post-discharge follow-up are organized as a single, continuous pathway rather than isolated steps. The highest-risk failures typically occur after early discharge, when bilirubin is rising, feeding is suboptimal, and families are unsure which signs are urgent. This article summarizes evidence-based approaches to (1) identify infants at risk for rapid bilirubin rise and neurotoxicity, (2) measure bilirubin with age-in-hours interpretation and appropriate confirmation of transcutaneous results, and (3) schedule follow-up based on the *distance from treatment thresholds* and the presence of neurotoxicity risk factors.

Keywords: neonatal jaundice; hyperbilirubinemia; risk assessment; bilirubin screening; transcutaneous bilirubin; total serum bilirubin.

INTRODUCTION

Neonatal jaundice is so common that it risks becoming “background noise” in routine newborn care, yet the rare outcomes we fear—severe hyperbilirubinemia, acute bilirubin encephalopathy, and kernicterus—are precisely the outcomes that demand systems-level vigilance. The clinical paradox is that most infants look well while bilirubin is rising, and visible skin color is an unreliable severity gauge across different skin tones, lighting, and examiner experience. Because bilirubin levels peak after discharge for many infants, the prevention of severe hyperbilirubinemia depends less on what happens *in one hospital day* and more

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on whether screening, risk stratification, feeding support, and timely follow-up are linked into a single pathway that continues into the first week of life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A practical evidence-based pathway begins with standardized bilirubin screening and interpretation by postnatal age in hours, because bilirubin risk is time-dependent. Predischarge total serum bilirubin (TSB) or transcutaneous bilirubin (TcB) should be measured and plotted/compared against age-specific risk frameworks rather than interpreted as a single "normal" number. The classic Bhutani hour-specific predischarge nomogram demonstrated that a universal bilirubin measurement before discharge can stratify infants into low, intermediate, and high risk for later significant hyperbilirubinemia, enabling targeted follow-up rather than uniform scheduling. [3] Modern practice has evolved from "percentile risk zones" toward follow-up decisions tied to how close the bilirubin value is to *treatment thresholds* and whether neurotoxicity risk factors are present. The AAP 2022 guideline is explicit on this approach: treatment thresholds (phototherapy and exchange transfusion) vary by gestational age and by the presence of neurotoxicity risk factors, and the timing of follow-up after discharge should be guided by measured bilirubin and these thresholds. [1] Clinically, this changes the discharge conversation from vague reassurance ("it's a bit yellow, watch it") to an actionable plan ("your baby's bilirubin is X at Y hours; it is Z below the phototherapy line; we will recheck in N hours/days"). That specificity is not bureaucracy—it is prevention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Risk assessment should then be layered on top of the bilirubin value, because two infants with the same bilirubin can have different trajectories. The key risk domains are (1) increased bilirubin production (e.g., bruising, cephalohematoma, polycythemia), (2) decreased clearance (prematurity, illness, genetic factors), (3) increased enterohepatic circulation and reduced intake (suboptimal breastfeeding, delayed milk transfer, excessive weight loss), and (4) hemolysis risk (ABO incompatibility, Rh disease, positive direct antiglobulin test, G6PD deficiency). The AAP guideline emphasizes identification of infants at risk for hyperbilirubinemia and neurotoxicity and integrates risk factors into threshold-based decisions. [1] NICE similarly mandates urgent evaluation for jaundice in

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the first 24 hours and ongoing bilirubin monitoring until levels are stable/falling and below treatment thresholds. [2] The practical "safety move" for outpatient prevention is to treat feeding assessment as a bilirubin intervention: inadequate intake increases jaundice risk and delays clearance, so lactation support, feeding frequency targets, and early follow-up for weight and hydration are not optional add-ons. When a baby's bilirubin is rising and feeding is weak, the right response is not "come back next week," but planned reassessment within a time window that matches the risk trajectory.

Follow-up scheduling is where protocols either prevent harm or quietly fail. Historically, many systems relied on the Bhutani risk zone approach to decide whether follow-up should occur within 24–48 hours versus later. [3] Contemporary guidance increasingly emphasizes follow-up determined by bilirubin proximity to treatment thresholds and risk factors. The AAP 2022 guideline provides a structured approach to post-discharge follow-up for infants who have not received phototherapy, and it distinguishes follow-up needs based on measured bilirubin and clinical risk—reinforcing that "one follow-up plan for all" is not safe. [1] Although local implementation details vary, the principle is consistent: infants closer to phototherapy thresholds, infants with neurotoxicity risk factors, and infants with early discharge or feeding concerns require earlier reassessment (often within 24 hours), while low-risk infants with bilirubin well below thresholds can be seen later. NICE similarly structures management around age-in-hours interpretation and provides threshold-based treatment graphs and monitoring guidance. [2] In practice, a robust protocol also includes *who* will do the follow-up (clinic, midwife, home visit), *what* will be measured (TcB vs TSB, weight, feeding), and *how* escalation will occur if the bilirubin has risen faster than expected.

TcB versus TSB decision-making should be protocolized because it affects both safety and access. TcB is useful for screening and trending, but TSB remains the reference standard for treatment decisions in many pathways, especially when bilirubin is near treatment thresholds, when the infant is very young, when gestational age is lower, or when hemolysis is suspected. NICE explicitly recommends bilirubin measurement (serum or transcutaneous depending on context) and urgent serum bilirubin measurement for jaundice in the first 24

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hours, with repeat testing intervals based on levels and stability. [2] The AAP guideline supports bilirubin screening and the use of TcB/TSB within structured pathways, with confirmation rules when values approach treatment lines. [1] The clinician-friendly way to operationalize this is simple: use TcB for rapid assessment in stable infants, but switch to TSB when (a) TcB is high or rising quickly, (b) the value is close to treatment thresholds, (c) the infant has hemolysis risk, or (d) the clinical situation is unclear. This prevents a common error: over-trusting a single device reading when the consequence of underestimation could be delayed treatment.

A complete prevention protocol must also address rebound and post-treatment follow-up, because severe cases can develop not only from missed screening but also from incomplete monitoring after therapy. After phototherapy, infants may experience rebound hyperbilirubinemia depending on hemolysis risk, gestational age, and how close bilirubin was to thresholds at discontinuation.

CONCLUSION

Severe hyperbilirubinemia and bilirubin-related neurologic injury are best prevented not by one heroic intervention, but by a reliable chain of routine steps: predischarge bilirubin measurement, hour-specific interpretation, identification of risk factors for rapid rise and neurotoxicity, feeding optimization, and follow-up scheduled according to bilirubin proximity to treatment thresholds and clinical risk. The 2022 AAP guideline strengthens this threshold-based, risk-calibrated approach to follow-up for infants ≥35 weeks' gestation and reinforces universal screening and structured post-discharge planning. NICE guidance similarly mandates urgent evaluation for jaundice in the first 24 hours and uses age-in-hours bilirubin interpretation with threshold-based management and monitoring. Classic evidence such as the Bhutani hour-specific predischarge nomogram supports the central concept that early bilirubin measurement can predict later risk and guide the timing of surveillance.

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