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.