Your baby has had a blood test called a **Coombs test** which is positive. This leaflet aims to explain what a positive Coombs test means.

**What is a Coombs test?**
This is a blood test commonly performed in newborn babies. Blood may be taken from the baby’s cord following delivery or from the baby him/herself. It tests for evidence of a reaction between the blood groups of the baby and his/her mother.

**What are blood groups?**
All pregnant women have a blood test to determine their blood group during their pregnancy. These blood groups can be **A, B, AB** or **O**. There is also **Rhesus** blood types, which are either “**positive**” or “**negative**”.

There are many other types of less important blood groups. These may be relevant during the pregnancy of some women.

**Reactions between baby and mother blood groups**
A baby’s blood group is inherited from both parents. It is common that a baby will have a different blood group to his/her mother. Sometimes a mother’s blood will recognise that the baby’s blood group is different and it produces substances called **antibodies**. These antibodies can cross to baby’s bloodstream where they destroy the baby’s red blood cells. This attack of the baby’s blood cells is detected by the Coombs test.

**What problems can happen when a Coombs test is positive?**
There are two main problems that can happen when a Coombs test is positive. These are **jaundice** and **anaemia**.

Many babies will not develop either of these problems but it is important to be aware of and check for them.

**Please note:** Pregnant women who are **Rhesus negative** may receive injections to prevent them producing antibodies against their baby’s blood. Sometimes this injection can cause the Coombs test to be positive.
What is Jaundice? Jaundice is yellow colour to the skin. It is caused by the build up in the skin of a pigment called bilirubin. Bilirubin is released when red blood cells are broken down. A mild degree of jaundice is very common in newborn babies and is not usually a problem. However babies who are Coombs positive may have higher levels of jaundice. High levels of jaundice need to be treated. The usual treatment for jaundice is phototherapy which involves exposing the baby to a light source. Another leaflet is available about Phototherapy.

What is Anaemia? Anaemia means that there are fewer red blood cells than usual. Anaemia can occur in Coombs positive babies because their red blood cells are broken down by the antibody from their mother. The anaemia may not be present at birth, but can develop over the first few weeks and months of life.

What will happen to my baby?

First few days
Your baby will be examined by a doctor or Advanced Nurse Practitioner. Blood tests will be taken to look for jaundice and anaemia. High jaundice levels will be treated with phototherapy. If your baby is thought to be at risk of developing anaemia they will be prescribed Folic Acid.

What is Folic Acid? Folic Acid is a medicine used by the body to make red blood cells. You will be shown how to give this to your baby before going home. Your baby should take this for 3 – 4 months.

At Home
It is possible that the jaundice and anaemia may get worse after your baby has gone home. Concerning symptoms include:
• Increasing jaundice
• Excessive sleepiness
• Poor feeding
• Fast breathing or difficulty breathing
• Baby appears pale

If you are worried, contact your midwife or General Practitioner (GP). Your baby may be given an appointment to return to the hospital clinic. At the clinic your baby’s progress will be reviewed and further blood tests may be required.

Will there be any long-term problems?
Most babies do not have any long-term problems. The mother’s antibodies which have caused the positive Coombs test reduce in number and are usually gone from the baby’s blood by 2 months of age.

If you need further advice or information please ask your doctor, nurse or midwife.

Developed by Parent Education Group and has been reviewed by Senior Neonatal staff. Parents have helped to develop this leaflet; we hope you find it useful.
Reviewed: 06/2016  Review: 06/2018  LN0991