

Name of the test:

Bilirubin test

Alternative name(s) of the test:

None. Different types of this test might check the amount of total bilirubin, direct bilirubin or indirect bilirubin.

What this test is used for:

The test is used to measure the amount of bilirubin in the blood. Bilirubin - a yellow pigment – is a breakdown product of heme, a substance found in hemoglobin. The result of heme breakdown is called indirect bilirubin, it is transported to the liver and there it gets converted to direct bilirubin. Direct bilirubin then enters the bile and moves to small intestines. Eventually it leaves the body with the stool.

Small amounts of bilirubin can be found in the blood and this is normal. However, when the bilirubin levels increase, as a result, a person's skin and sclera may become yellow. This is called jaundice.

It is important to determine which form of bilirubin is increased – indirect or direct. If indirect bilirubin levels are elevated, it may be due to hemolysis or a liver disease that prevents conversion of bilirubin to direct form, for example cirrhosis. If direct bilirubin is elevated, then this means that indirect bilirubin is converted to direct one in the liver, but that for some reason it is unable to move to small intestines with the bile. This may be caused by a bile duct blockage or hepatitis.

When the test is ordered:

The bilirubin test is ordered when an adult or a newborn has a jaundice. It is performed when hemolysis, a liver disease or the bile duct blockage is suspected.

How this test is performed:

A blood sample is taken from a vein.

How to prepare for the test:

Fasting might be required several hours prior to the test. Some conditions and medications may affect the test results. Consult your doctor for further instructions.

Interpretation of results:

Generally, high levels of indirect bilirubin may be due to hemolysis or cirrhosis. High levels of direct bilirubin may be caused by blockage of bile ducts (because of gallstones, tumors, etc.). There are many disorders which may cause elevated levels of bilirubin. The results should be interpreted by a doctor.