Prenatal Check-ups and Tests

Regular visits to a doctor or midwife, paired with several common procedures and tests, can help ensure an expectant mother and her baby are progressing normally through a pregnancy. The following document explains the importance of prenatal care and examines several tests and procedures medical personnel commonly perform on pregnant women and their babies.

Check-ups

During pregnancy, it is important for women to regularly visit their doctor to have their health, and that of the baby, monitored. These regular check-ups are collectively known as prenatal care. The goal of prenatal care is to keep the mother and baby healthy, to spot problems if they occur and to try to prevent conditions that would lead to difficulties during delivery.

An average pregnancy lasts about 40 weeks. Women can expect to see their doctor more often as they approach their due date. A typical schedule includes visiting a doctor or midwife:

- About once each month during the first six months of pregnancy
- Every two weeks during the seventh and eighth months of pregnancy
- Every week during the ninth month of pregnancy

Doctors will request to see some women more often during their pregnancies. This includes women over the age of 35 and women whose pregnancies have been identified as being high risk because of certain health problems like diabetes or high blood pressure.

Pregnant women should be sure to keep their appointments and ask questions if they do not understand something. They should tell their doctor if they feel or detect anything strange or different during the pregnancy.

Prenatal Tests and Procedures

Most women undergo a wide variety of prenatal tests. Women often undergo the following exams after pregnancy has been established:

- A pelvic exam to check the uterus or womb
- A Pap test, or Pap smear, to check for changes in the cervical cells
- Blood pressure and weight gain will be monitored
- Urine may be tested for signs of diabetes
- The baby's heart rate will be monitored

Many of these tests take place multiple times during medical exams throughout the pregnancy.

Screening Tests

Doctors and midwives may recommend a number of laboratory tests, ultrasound exams or other screening tests for expectant mothers.

Screening tests measure the risk of having a baby with some genetic birth defects. Birth defects are caused by problems with a baby's genes, inherited factors passed down from the mother and the father. Birth defects can also occur randomly in people with no family history of a particular disorder. Women over the age of 35 are at an increased risk of having a child born with certain birth defects.

The benefit of screening tests is that they do not pose any risk to the fetus or mother. However, screening tests cannot tell for sure if a baby has a birth defect; they do not give a "yes" or "no" answer.

Instead, screening tests provide the odds that a baby will have a birth defect based on the age of the mother. Women under the age of 35 will find out if their risk is as high as that of a 35-year-old woman. For women over age 35, screening tests will determine if their risk is higher or lower than average.

The following are some common screening tests performed during pregnancy:

- ***Targeted ultrasound.*** Ultrasound imaging produces pictures of what is inside a body using high-frequency sound waves. Doctors use it during pregnancy to non-intrusively monitor the development of the fetus. The best time for women to have an ultrasound is between the 18th and 20th weeks of pregnancy. Most major developmental problems with babies can be seen at this time. Some problems like clubbed feet and heart defects are not easily detected using ultrasound. Doctors can also often see if a baby has any neural tube defects such as spina bifida, and in most cases, doctors can determine the sex of a baby by using ultrasound.

- ***Maternal serum marker screening test.*** This blood test is called by many different names including the multiple marker screening test, the triple test and the quad screen. It is usually given between the 15th and 20th weeks of pregnancy. The test checks for birth defects such as Down syndrome, trisomy 18 and open neural tube defects. Doctors take a sample of the mother's blood and check for the presence of chemicals and hormones linked to defects and conditions.

- ***Nuchal translucency screening (NTS).*** NTS is a new type of screening that can be done between the 11th and 14th weeks of pregnancy. It uses an ultrasound and blood test to calculate the risk of some birth defects. Doctors use the ultrasound exam to check the thickness of the back of the fetus' neck. They also test the mother's blood for levels of a protein called pregnancy-associated plasma protein and a hormone called human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG). Doctors use this information when determining if a fetus has a normal or greater than normal chance of having some birth defects.

Diagnostic Tests

Diagnostic tests can provide definite "yes" or "no" answers about whether a baby has a birth defect. But, unlike screening tests, they are invasive or come with a risk of miscarriage. Amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling (CVS) are the two most commonly used diagnostic tests. Both are accurate more than 99 percent of the time. It often takes about two weeks to receive the results of diagnostic tests.

- ***Amniocentesis.*** Amniocentesis is most often performed when the pregnancy has reached at least 16 weeks. This involves the doctor inserting a thin needle through the abdomen and into the woman's uterus. The needle enters the amniotic sac and a small amount of amniotic fluid is withdrawn for testing. Cells from the fluid are grown in a lab to look for problems with chromosomes. The fluid also can be tested for signs of neural tube defects and Down syndrome. About one in 200 women who have amniocentesis suffer a miscarriage as a result of the test.

- ***Chorionic villus sampling (CVS).*** The CVS test is performed between the 10th and 12th weeks of pregnancy. The doctor inserts a needle through the abdomen (or inserts a catheter through the cervix) in order to reach the placenta. The doctor then takes a sample of cells from the placenta. These cells are used in a lab to look for problems with chromosomes. About one in 400 to one in 200 women have a miscarriage as a result of the CVS test.

Many pregnancy care procedures are fully covered under health insurance plans. Visit HealthCare.gov for a comprehensive list: https://www.healthcare.gov/preventive-care-women/.

Resources

- American College of Nurse-Midwives: www.midwife.org
- American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists: www.acog.org
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Institutes of Health: www.nlm.nih.gov

Some information on this page was gathered from documents found on the National Women's Health Information Center, part of the United States Department of Health and Human Services: www.womenshealth.gov.

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