

EXPLANATION OF PRENATAL TESTS

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AFP PROFILE FOUR SCREENING. Alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) is a protein produced by the fetus that passes into the amniotic fluid and then into the mother's blood. High or low values may indicate abnormalities of the spinal cord or chromosome disorders. AFP levels are most accurately measured and interpreted from 15 to 18 weeks of pregnancy by obtaining a maternal blood sample. No birth defect is ever diagnosed solely by the AFP. Further testing is necessary.

AMNIOCENTESIS This is a diagnostic test offered to women over age 35 or with a family history of genetic abnormalities. A thin needle is passed through the mother's abdomen into the uterus to obtain a sample of amniotic fluid. Cells from this fluid are grown in a genetics laboratory for two weeks. The chromosomes are then studied for Down Syndrome and other chromosomal abnormalities. In the third trimester, this test can also be administered to analyze for chemicals that indicate fetal lung maturity. We refer our patients to centers experienced in performing these procedures.

BIOPHYSICAL PROFILE (BPP) The BPP uses ultrasound to observe amniotic fluid volume and fetal activity, muscle tone and breathing. It is performed in certain circumstances in the third trimester.

BLOOD TYPE This test determines your blood type. For women whose blood type is RH negative, an injection of Rhogam is given at 28 weeks of pregnancy and again postpartum if your baby is RH positive. These injections prevent antibody formation which could affect future pregnancies.

DIABETES TEST The Glucose Loading Test (GLT), usually performed at 26 to 28 weeks, is a blood test performed one hour after taking a flavored glucose drink. It screens for diabetes which may arise during pregnancy. There is no fasting preparation for this test. An elevated GLT indicates the need for further testing.

EARLY RISK ASSESSMENT. This is a screen for Down Syndrome, performed between 11 and 13 weeks. It involves a blood test called PAPP-A and a sonogram to measure the fetal neck-fold thickness (nuchal lucency). This test is offered to women who will be 35 years of age or older at the time of delivery.

HIV/AIDS HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is a disease which may take years for symptoms to occur. Therefore, many people who are infected with the HIV virus don't know it. A pregnant woman who has been exposed to the HIV virus can pass it on to her baby. Certain behaviors put a woman at risk for contracting the virus, such as: using injectable drugs; having unprotected sex (sex without a condom); receiving a blood transfusion prior to 1985. A blood test, which is offered to all patients, and encouraged, determines if you have been exposed.

NON-STRESS TESTING (NST) This test assesses fetal well-being by monitoring the fetal heart rate pattern. Testing may take up to 40 minutes. It is performed in certain circumstances in the third trimester.

RUBELLA (GERMAN MEASLES) SCREENING This disease can cause birth defects if a pregnant woman contracts it during early pregnancy. Once a person has had rubella, he or she cannot get it again. This test indicates whether a person has ever had the infection or has ever been vaccinated against it.

SYPHILIS SCREEN (RPR) Syphilis is an infection which can be present without causing any symptoms and can be passed from a pregnant woman to her unborn child. This is one of the maternal infections which can be harmful to the baby. The RPR blood test screens for this. Elevated RPR levels indicate a need for further testing.

ULTRASOUND This is a diagnostic test which uses sound waves to produce an image of the fetus before birth. We recommend this test for specific indications, such as vaginal bleeding, the questions of twins or assessment of fetal growth. Many insurance companies no longer pay for a routine ultrasound. You may want to check with your individual carrier to see if they cover a "fetal survey".