

Prenatal Health Care and Testing

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According to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, pregnant women should plan to visit a doctor once a month for the first 28 weeks, every other week between weeks 28 and 36, and weekly from weeks 36 to birth. An important consideration in choosing a doctor is whether a pregnancy is likely to be normal or high-risk. If a woman has high blood pressure, diabetes, a history of pregnancy complications or is younger than 18 or older than 35, she should seek care from a doctor experienced in treating women with her medical condition.

Standard prenatal testing can help relieve worries during pregnancy and keep a mother informed. Prenatal tests identify health problems in the mother that can affect the baby, characteristics of the baby, and fetal abnormalities, such as heart problems or genetic disorders.

Some prenatal tests are screening tests, only revealing the possibility of a problem. Other prenatal tests are diagnostic and can determine with more certainty whether a fetus has a problem. Screening tests are followed by diagnostic tests if there is any question of a problem.

FIRST TRIMESTER TESTS

During an initial visit, a woman can expect to have a full physical exam, which may or may not include a pelvic and rectal examination. It is customary for a woman



to undergo blood and urine testing on this visit. Blood tests check for antibodies dangerous to the fetus, anemia, sexually transmitted diseases and cystic fibrosis. Urine tests check for bacteria, certain harmful proteins and abnormal sugar levels. The doctor will also calculate a woman's due date, and depending on her ethnic and family background, offer additional tests to assess risks for other diseases. In subsequent first trimester visits, a doctor may simply check blood pressure and weight and discuss signs and symptoms with the mother.

SECOND TRIMESTER TESTS

Around 16 to 18 weeks, a woman may have a maternal serum genetic screen (or "triple screen") to check for genetic disorders in the baby. Depending on the results of this test and the mother's age and history, a doctor may suggest additional

prenatal tests to detect Down syndrome or other genetic abnormalities. Ultrasounds are often given around week 20 to verify a due date, check for multiple fetuses, determine the baby's sex and look for proper growth. A woman may have a glucose screening at 24 to 28 weeks to test for pregnancy-induced diabetes.

THIRD TRIMESTER TESTS

Common third trimester tests include electronic fetal heart monitoring; a non-stress test, measuring the baby's heart rate as it moves; a contraction stress test, measuring the baby's heart rate in response to simulated contractions; and a biophysical profile of the baby. At 35 to 37 weeks, a woman may undergo screening to detect group B strep bacteria, a leading cause of life-threatening infections in newborns. ♥

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