

Pregnancy: Prenatal Exams, Tests, and Procedures

What are prenatal exams, tests, and procedures?

Various exams, tests, and procedures are a part of your checkups during your pregnancy. Prenatal tests can help both the baby and the mother. Some tests check for diseases that the mother may have. Other tests look for birth defects. Still other tests are done to confirm the age, weight, and health of the baby. Some tests are routine and usually done for all pregnant women. Other tests are optional and depend on factors such as your medical history and what happens during the pregnancy. You may need to give your permission to have the tests done after the reasons to have the test are carefully explained to you.

At each visit your healthcare provider will discuss with you any problems you are having, such as headaches, swelling of your hands or feet, contractions, or bleeding. Keep all of your appointments. Regular checkups with your healthcare provider allow prevention and early detection of many problems. Your provider can then adjust the plan for your care as needed.

What normal signs and symptoms of pregnancy will my healthcare provider check?

Your healthcare provider will look for physical changes and symptoms that happen during pregnancy. Signs and symptoms may include:

- Nausea, tiredness, breast tenderness, breast enlargement, and urinary frequency in early pregnancy
- An embryo that can be seen in an ultrasound scan as early as 5 to 6 weeks after your last period
- Enlarged uterus at about 6 to 8 weeks
- Enlarged abdomen at about 14 weeks
- Parts and movements of the baby that can be felt by your healthcare provider at about 18 weeks
- The baby's heartbeat heard with a Doppler fetoscope at 12 to 14 weeks, or with an ordinary fetoscope at about 19 weeks
- Movement by the baby that you can feel at about 20 weeks if this is your first pregnancy, or as early as 16 weeks if you have been pregnant before
- Changes in the color of your vagina, cervix, and skin

What are the routine tests and procedures?

Common tests and procedures done during prenatal visits include:

- Urine or blood test for pregnancy at your first visit

- Pelvic exam to check the size of your pelvis, a Pap test of the cervix, and cervical cultures for sexually transmitted diseases (usually done only very early in the pregnancy)
- Physical exam including a breast exam
- Calculation of the gestational age of the baby (that is, figure out how long you have been pregnant)
- Measurement of your height, weight, and blood pressure
- Tests of a sample of your urine to look for bacteria, protein, sugar, and other chemicals in the urine
- Measurement of the height of the fundus (the top of your uterus)
- A check of the size and position of the baby
- Blood tests to check for:
 - Anemia (may be done each trimester)
 - Diabetes when you are 28 weeks pregnant
 - Blood type
 - Rh antibodies
 - Immunity to rubella (German measles)
 - Sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis
 - Hepatitis
 - HIV, the virus that causes AIDS
- Cultures of cells from your cervix to test for infection
- Cultures of swabs of the vagina and rectum to test for Group B streptococcus (also called beta strep) in the 35th to 37th weeks of pregnancy
- Skin test for tuberculosis (TB)
- Examination of your ankles and lower legs for swelling

What other tests might my healthcare provider order?

Other tests that may be done include:

- Ultrasound scans as needed to look at the baby and your uterus, amniotic sac, placenta, ovaries, and pelvis
- Chorionic villus sampling of cells from the placenta for information about your baby's chromosomes and detection of some birth defects
- Amniocentesis for testing of fluid from around the baby for chromosome information and detection of some birth defects
- Serum alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) measurement to screen for certain birth defects
- Other blood tests that check for genetic problems or birth defects, such as the triple or quad screen tests, cystic fibrosis screening, and sickle cell disease testing
- Nonstress tests to check the health of the baby by checking the baby's heart rate when the baby moves

Women with high risk factors may have additional tests and procedures, such as:

- Test for herpes
- A shot of Rho(D) immune globulin (RhIg) at 28 weeks if you are Rh negative and the father is Rh positive
- Amniocentesis to see how mature the baby's lungs are near the end of the pregnancy
- Blood tests for clotting studies or liver function
- Nonstress tests once or twice a week
- Biophysical profile (checks the health of the baby with a nonstress test and ultrasound)
- Contraction stress tests to check the baby's health by checking the baby's heart rate during uterine contractions

Getting regular checkups and tests when you need them can help you and your baby stay healthy.

Developed by RelayHealth.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.