



Prenatal Screening

Before the 1980's, no blood or screening tests were available to pregnant women to assess the chances of their baby being born with Down syndrome. It was then recognised that a low level of alpha-fetoprotein (AFP) in the mother's blood was more common where babies had chromosomal abnormalities, including Down syndrome.

Blood Screening Tests

Several blood screening tests have been developed to assess whether a pregnant woman has an increased chance of having a baby with Down syndrome.

However, screening has proven to be imperfect in that not all mothers carrying a baby with Down syndrome will screen positive. Moreover, most mothers who do screen positive turn out to have an unaffected foetus when further tests are performed.

If screening suggests an increased risk, further diagnostic tests are available which can confirm a diagnosis.

Diagnostic Testing

Amniocentesis is the most common form of antenatal diagnosis. A thin needle is inserted into the womb to collect a sample of the amniotic fluid for examination. The fluid contains some cells from the foetus. There is a small risk (1%) of miscarriage.

Chorionic villus sampling (CVS) is an alternative to amniocentesis. The procedure is similar, but in this case cells are collected from the developing placenta and not the womb. This form of prenatal screening is conducted at an earlier stage than amniocentesis (about ten weeks). CVS also carries a risk of miscarriage (2-3%)

For more information contact:

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