

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT ALPHA FETOPROTEIN TESTING

WHAT IS AFP?

AFP (alpha fetoprotein) is a protein that is normally produced by the developing baby. It occurs in the baby's blood in the fluid that surrounds the baby and in the blood of the pregnant mother.

WHY DO WE MEASURE AFP?

The mother's blood AFP level can help determine those individuals who are at a higher-risk of having a baby with certain birth defects.

HOW OFTEN ARE BABIES BORN WITH NEURAL TUBE DEFECTS?

WHAT IS A SCREENING TEST?

These are among the most frequent serious types of birth defects in the United States. About 1 to 2 out of 1000 babies born has a neural tube defect.

WHAT IS A SCREENING TEST?

It is a simple blood test for all pregnant women between 15 and 20 weeks of pregnancy that tells the doctor if other tests are needed.

WHAT IF THE AFP BLOOD TEST IS HIGH?

The most likely explanation for high AFP levels are normal variations in blood AFP levels, the baby is older than thought, or that this is twin or multiple pregnancy. It could also mean that the baby's spine and head may not be developing normally. Further tests are needed to explain why the AFP level is elevated.

WHAT IF THE AFP BLOOD TEST IS LOW?

The most frequent causes of low AFP are normal variations in blood AFP levels or that the baby is younger than thought. It may mean that the baby has a chromosome abnormality. Further tests are needed to determine the reason for a low AFP value.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE AFP VALUES ARE HIGH OR LOW?

Your doctor may tell you that another AFP test is needed and will inform you about other prenatal services such as genetic counseling, ultrasound, or amniocentesis.

WILL THIS TEST ALWAYS DETECT NEURAL TUBE DEFECTS?

No. It will detect 8 out of 10 cases of neural tube defects. It will detect some of the cases of chromosome abnormalities. However, there are many types of birth defects that cannot be detected before the baby is born.

PLEASE REMEMBER:

Usually, "high" or "low" results do not mean something is wrong. However, it indicates that further testing may be necessary as advised by your physician.