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Neural Tube Defect Screening

What is a Neural Tube Defect?

Most babies are born healthy, but about one or two out of 1,000 babies are born with a neural tube defect; an opening along the baby's spine or brain. This type of defect is the second most common fetal anomaly. Openings involving the brain (anencephaly) are the most severe and are incompatible with life. Openings along the spinal column (spina bifida) may vary in severity, but can be associated with paralysis, problems with bladder and bowel control and learning problems when hydrocephalus (water on the brain) is present. The risk of neural tube defects does not increase with increasing maternal age, as most neural tube defects are not due to chromosome abnormality. Most babies with a neural tube defect are born to couples with no family history of these sorts of problems.

Folic acid, found in certain foods and prenatal vitamins, has been shown to dramatically reduce the risk of neural tube defects. Folic acid needs to be taken very early in the pregnancy to reduce the risk of neural tube defects. For this reason, it is recommended that all women of childbearing age take at least 0.4mg (400mcg) of folic acid per day, both before and during pregnancy. Please consult with your physician if you have a personal and/or family history of neural tube defects, as more folic acid may be recommended.

Screening for Neural Tube Defects

Screening for neural tube defects is done by testing maternal serum alpha fetal protein levels (a maternal blood test). Screening is performed ideally at 16 to 18 weeks of gestation. If an abnormal test result is returned, then the next step is to obtain a specialized ultrasound examination to further assess whether a neural tube defect, or other abnormality, is present. This testing is offered to all patients but is optional. Please speak to your provider if you have additional questions or concerns.

References: www.uptodate.com