

PREPARE, BE AWARE AND CARE: THE VALUE OF PRENATAL CHECKUPS FOR MOTHERS

Congratulations! You're pregnant. Mother's world-wide, whether first timers or fifth timers, feel a mixture of happiness, anxiety about the baby's health and various expectations about their pregnancy. Pregnancy is a very personal experience but all mothers want the best outcomes for their babies and themselves.



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PREPARE.

For the best pregnancy outcomes, good prenatal care is essential. Choosing a qualified obstetrician is an important first step. Their understanding of the expectant mothers needs, can individualize and steer her antenatal course safely and, minimise her anxiety.

The mutual goals of the obstetrician and mother are birth of a healthy baby with the best possible Apgar scores (a newborn's checklist of health); a meaningful and pleasant birth; and a speedy recovery for the mother.

BE AWARE.

Knowledge is empowering. Being aware and informed are essential to a successful pregnancy. A well-equipped clinic like the Maternal Fetal Medical Clinic at the Hong Kong Adventist Hospital can provide the tests and investigations needed to keep mother and doctor fully aware during all three trimesters (stages) of the pregnancy. They also provide a pre-pregnancy counselling service.

The first trimester check (up to 14 weeks), confirms your pregnancy and expected delivery date, using ultrasound. This non-invasive test displays a real time picture of the moving foetus on a monitor. This is often an emotional experience for the mother and father. Also, at this check, your obstetrician should be informed of the mothers' health. Familiar, genetic or existing health issues are discussed, with counselling provided to at risk mothers.

All mothers worry about their baby's health. Specific tests to screen for abnormalities such as Down's syndrome (a genetic condition caused by an extra chromosome and resulting in specific physical characteristics and often some mental handicaps) can be done at this time. Blood tests (Papp-A test), Nuchal fold test via ultrasound and an Oscar test of risk, aids the doctor advise the mother appropriately of any risks to her foetus. Chorionic villus sampling of placental tissue is another test for Down's syndrome that can be done at this early stage. A mother's age is a leading risk factor in having a Down's syndrome baby and many doctors recommend mothers over 35 years be screened.

In the second trimester (up to 28 weeks), ultra sound enables structural scans to rule out fetal abnormality. Other tests such as ultrasound for cervical length, vaginal fluid for Fibronetine helps determine premature labour risk; Diabetes checks for mothers at risk; and serial checks for maternal health and fetal growth can also be done. A triple marker screening blood test for Down's syndrome can be done at this stage.

In the third trimester, most importantly, your obstetrician provides discussion of the mothers' birth options. Natural birth and caesarean section (vaginal or abdominal) is discussed. Pain relief options including epidural anaesthesia during labour and breast-feeding options will be discussed. Additionally, your doctor will check for signs of premature labour, hypertension of pregnancy, diabetes and fetal growth retardation (rate and size). Checks are made to ensure normal fetal position and placental location. Screens for vaginal infections and the size of the pelvic cavity are also performed.

CARE.

Pregnancy may be a new experience or a repeat experience for a mother. It will, however, be a different experience on every occasion. The prenatal care a mother takes under the guidance of her obstetrician enables her to be fully prepared and fully aware during her pregnancy. Using the most up-to-date investigations, screens and tests will ensure her the safest possible care and best outcomes for her baby and herself.