



AFP (alpha-fetoprotein)

What is measured in a screening test?

Four substances are measured in the pregnant women's blood: AFP, which is produced by the baby's liver; unconjugated estriol, which is produced by the placenta; human chorionic gonadotropin, also produced by the placenta; and inhibin A.

All four levels, in combination with the maternal age, are used to estimate the risk of a chromosome problem. AFP alone is used to assess the risk of neural tube defect.

What does a negative test result mean?

This is a reassuring result which means the risk of neural tube defect is less than 1 per 1000 and the risk of Down syndrome is less than 1 per 250. Depending on your age, it is possible to get a slightly increased risk assessment for Down's syndrome, and still get a negative result. A negative result does not guarantee that the baby will not have a neural tube defect or Down's syndrome, as this is only a screening test.

What does a positive result mean?

This means the risk of Down's syndrome or a neural defect is increased. The most likely explanations for positive results are:

- Normal variations in blood levels
- The pregnancy is less advanced or further advanced than was thought
- It is a twin or multiple pregnancy
- There is a chance of a neural tube defect or a chromosomal problem

About 4% of all women screened will get a positive result. Most of these women will have normal, healthy babies: however, further tests such as ultrasound and amniocentesis may be indicated. If the test results are positive, you will receive further information from your provider and perhaps from a genetic counselor.

What are the most important things to remember?

There are no tests in pregnancy which provide a 100% guarantee of a normal outcome, but chances are in your favor, even with an increased risk assessment, of having a healthy baby.