

Screening for Newborn Heart Problems



Interior Health
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Patient Information • Kelowna General Hospital and Royal Inland Hospital

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Why screen newborns for heart problems?

Congratulations on the birth of your new baby! One of the things that your baby will have before you are sent home is a screen for heart problems. This is done by measuring the oxygen levels in your baby's blood with a monitor called a pulse oximeter.

The type of heart problems your baby is being screened for are called Critical Congenital Heart Defect, a group of heart defects that babies are born with. Babies may look healthy in the first few days after birth even if they have life threatening heart problems. Screening helps your doctor or midwife identify and treat heart problems sooner so babies with Critical Congenital Heart Disease can be treated within the first year of life and have better outcomes. It is important to know that screening does not identify all types of heart problems a baby may be born with.

How do we screen for critical congenital heart problems?

A simple and painless monitor, called pulse oximetry, is used to measure how much oxygen is in your baby's blood. All babies will have pulse oximetry done after they are 24 hours old, or as close to discharge as possible if you are leaving the hospital before 24 hours. Getting a reading from a pulse oximeter takes less than 5 minutes to do. You may hold your baby during the test to help keep him or her warm and quiet. A nurse will place a "sensor" that looks like a band-aid™ on your baby's hand and then his or her foot. The sensor is connected by a cable to a monitor. The monitor measures the percentage of oxygen in your baby's blood.

What do the results mean for my baby?

The usual percentage of oxygen in the blood is 95% or more. A low level of oxygen in your baby's blood does not always mean that there is a heart problem. Babies whose heart and lungs are still adjusting after birth can also have lower oxygen levels in their blood. More testing is needed to determine if your baby has a Critical Congenital Heart Disease.

Pulse oximetry cannot find all the possible problems in a baby's heart. It is possible for a baby with a serious heart problem to have a normal pulse oximetry screen. All babies should have regular visits with a care provider.

What happens if the oxygen level in my baby's blood seems low?

A doctor or midwife will then look at your baby carefully for any signs that might help them understand why the oxygen level is lower. They may choose to ask a special doctor, such as a Pediatrician or a Pediatric Cardiologist, to help care for your baby. If your baby is born in a small hospital, you may need to travel to a hospital that can give your baby special heart testing and care.

Questions?

If you have any questions about pulse oximetry or heart problems in babies, please ask the doctor or midwife that is providing your care. You may also ask the doctor, midwife and/or nurse caring for your baby after he or she is born.

Healthlink BC	Nurse	24 hours a day	Daily	<i>Call 8-1-1 to speak with a nurse, ask a dietitian about nutrition, or a pharmacist about your medication.</i>
Call 8-1-1	Dietitian	9 am–5 pm	Mon–Fri	
	Pharmacist	5 pm–9 am	Daily	
	Hearing Impaired	Call 7-1-1		
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