

# ***A practical introduction to amniocentesis***

## ***What amniocentesis screens for***

During amniocentesis, a small amount of amniotic fluid is extracted from your uterus. The fluid and the fetal cells within are analyzed for chromosomal abnormalities, including Down syndrome, genetic diseases, such as Tay-Sachs and sickle cell anemia, and neural tube defects, such as spina bifida. Later in pregnancy, if there is some medical reason to deliver the baby a week or two early, amnio can show whether the baby's lungs are mature enough for labor induction.

## ***Who amniocentesis is for***

Genetic testing during pregnancy is recommended in Germany for women over 35. But like chorionic villus sampling, amniocentesis is an opt-in test. With your treating gynecologist, you will want to evaluate your risk factors (including age, family history, pregnancy history, and screening test results), and your own feelings about the test and about termination of pregnancy, should the results reveal a serious problem.

## ***How amniocentesis is done***

You lie flat on your back for this procedure, with a drape placed over you, leaving just your belly exposed. Your abdomen will be cleaned with an iodine solution to prevent infection. An ultrasound will be performed to locate the position of the fetus and the amniotic sac. A long, thin needle will be inserted into your abdomen and uterus. The perinatologist (maternal-fetal specialist who performs the procedure) will be looking for a spot away from the baby, where there is a good pocket of fluid to withdraw — about one to two tablespoons are all that's needed. Throughout the procedure, the perinatologist will be guided by the ultrasound. From start to finish, the procedure will take about 30 minutes (but most of that is all setup — that unpleasant needle-sticking part takes a minute or less).

## ***Fear factor***

More women are probably more afraid of this procedure than any other pregnancy test. After all, the idea of a needle going into your body, near your beautiful baby, can seem pretty scary. But most women report that amnio wasn't as bad as they thought it was going to be. The needle, though long, is *very* thin, and therefore doesn't cause much pain. You may feel cramping as it pierces the uterus, and a pulling sensation as the fluid is withdrawn, but these feelings aren't particularly painful — just weird. Plan on having someone drive you home after the procedure, and spend the day resting. So put your feet up — you earned this one!

## ***When it's done***

Amniocentesis for genetic testing during pregnancy is usually performed between weeks 15 and 20. Results are available within one to two weeks. Amnio to test for lung maturity might be done anytime after 32 weeks (before that it can be assumed that the lungs are not mature). Results are available within a day.

## ***Risks***

Amniocentesis increases your chance of miscarriage by 0.5 to one percent. At specialised medical centers, where this procedure is performed every day, the risks can be even lower.

Other side effects to this form of genetic testing during pregnancy may include vaginal bleeding and amniotic fluid leakage. Both issues usually go away on their own within a day or two, without any threat to the pregnancy. And, as with CVS, you will need an injection of RhoGAM after an amnio if you are Rh-negative.