

Why blood pressure and urine are checked in pregnancy

Your blood pressure and urine should be checked at every antenatal appointment. This is because changes in blood pressure and urine can be signs of a pregnancy problem called pre-eclampsia. This can make you and your baby unwell if it is not noticed early. Regular checks help keep you both safe.

What is blood pressure?

Blood pressure is the force of blood pumping around your body. It is measured in your upper arm with an inflatable cuff. The blood pressure is recorded as two numbers: the first (and the highest) number shows the pressure during a heart beat; the second shows the pressure between beats. Blood pressure varies between people. It also changes with the time of day and what you are doing. An average blood pressure of 110/70 or 120/80 is normal for women. But yours might be slightly higher or lower and still be completely normal for you.

Blood pressure in pregnancy

Your midwife will find out your blood pressure at your first antenatal appointment. She or your doctor will check it again at every visit after that.

What if my blood pressure is high?

Stress, worry or activity can raise your blood pressure for a while. But if it stays up, you may be getting pre-eclampsia. There is no clear line between normal and high blood pressure. But doctors and midwives normally worry about readings of 140/90 or more. If your blood pressure is high, your midwife or doctor will need to check it more often. Each time they check it they should also check your urine for protein.

Urine checks for protein

Your urine gives vital clues about the health of you and your baby. It should be checked at least once for infection, which is more common than usual in pregnancy. But it should be checked at every appointment for protein, which can be a sign of pre-eclampsia.

How the test works

Your midwife or doctor dips a paper strip (dipstick) into a fresh sample of urine. The test shows whether protein is there and how much protein is there. A tiny amount of protein is written in your notes as a 'trace'. This is nothing to worry about. More than a trace of protein is noted as one or more + signs.

What if protein is found?

If you have one + or more of protein and high blood pressure, you probably have pre-eclampsia and will need extra care. Your urine may be checked for other causes of protein, such as infection. If this is found and treated then the protein will disappear and you won't need extra care anymore.

If you have pre-eclampsia

Pre-eclampsia and you

Once you are in hospital your blood pressure and urine will be checked often. If your blood pressure goes very high - 160/100 or more - you may need drugs to control it. But these will not harm your unborn baby. Pre-eclampsia can affect many parts of your body, and you may be tested for problems with your liver, kidneys and blood clotting system. The doctors and midwives looking after you will also need to know if you feel unwell because this can mean the illness is getting worse.

Pre-eclampsia and your baby

Pre-eclampsia can also affect your unborn baby. He or she will be checked regularly for slow growth and other signs of ill health. Some babies remain healthy even when their mothers have severe pre-eclampsia. But if your baby seems unwell your doctor may advise an early birth.

Birth and afterwards

With pre-eclampsia there is a high chance that you will have an induced birth or a caesarean section. You and your baby will be monitored closely during labour and birth. After your baby is born you should get better quickly. But it can take a few days, weeks or even months for your blood pressure to return to normal. If your baby is born early he or she may need special care for a while. A baby who is mature or recovers well from an early birth should be fine.

It's not your fault!

Pre-eclampsia is not caused by bad living habits or prevented by good ones. The high blood pressure is caused by the illness not by stress, worry or hard work. You are not to blame.

If you feel ill...

Many women feel well with pre-eclampsia. But feeling ill can be the first sign that you have the illness - or that it is getting worse.

What to look out for

- Bad headaches that don't go away
- Blurred vision, flashing lights or spots before your eyes
- Bad pain just below your ribs, especially on the right side
- Vomiting (not the 'morning sickness' of early pregnancy)

These symptoms do not always mean pre-eclampsia, but to be safe after 20 weeks contact your health professional at once.

If you want further information write to:

Action on Pre-Eclampsia

84-88 Pinner Road,

Harrow, Middlesex HA1 4HZ

e-mail: info@apec.org.uk

Registered charity no. 1013557

© APEC 2004-07-12

www.apec.org.uk

Action on Pre-Eclampsia is a national charity which helps and supports women with pre-eclampsia. Action on Pre-Eclampsia run courses for midwives and doctors. Action on Pre-Eclampsia can help by giving you further information, or support on the telephone helpline.

Helpline number 020 8427 4217