



Testing for infections in pregnancy

Produced for the



UK National Screening
Committee



Testing for Infections

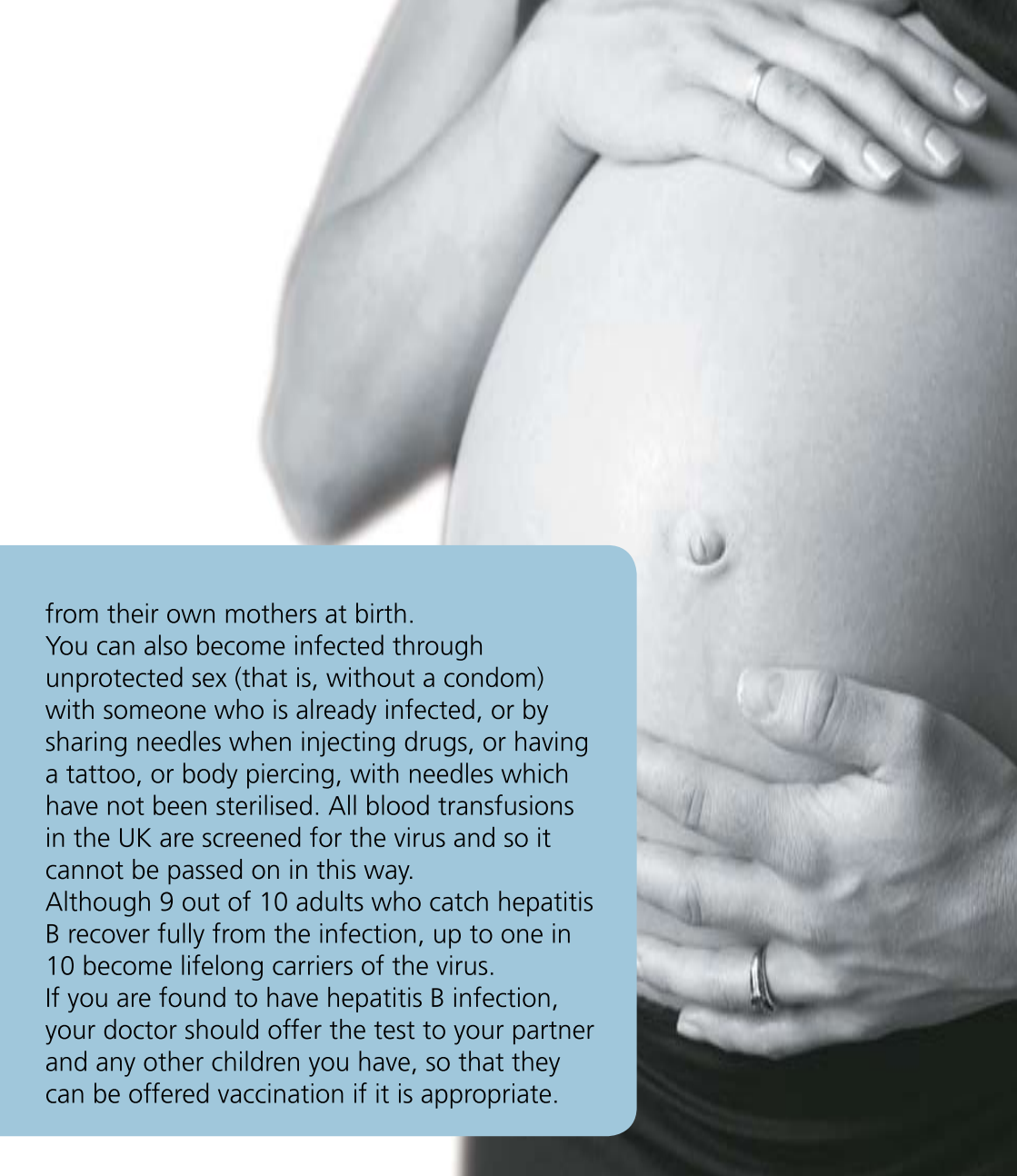
At your first antenatal visit you will be offered and recommended tests for hepatitis B, HIV, rubella and syphilis. The tests can all be done on one blood sample, and are offered to help protect the health of you and your baby. Although the infections may not make you feel ill, if they are not detected they can cause serious damage to your baby. If we know about them, you can receive special care or medicine to reduce the risk of damage. It is better to have the tests as early as possible, but they can be done at any time during your pregnancy. If you decide not to have any of them, it will not affect the rest of your care in any way. Your midwife will tell you how the results of these tests will be given to you. If a test suggests that you have an infection, a second test will be done to check the result. Insurance companies are not concerned about you having any of these tests. It is only if you are actually found to have HIV, syphilis or hepatitis B infection that future insurance cover might be affected.

Confidentiality

The results of these tests will be dealt with in strict confidence. No information about you, or your results, will be given to anyone outside the health care team without your consent and knowledge. Some non-identifying information is gathered for essential public health purposes. However your privacy is protected and those receiving this information will not be able to identify you.

Hepatitis B

If you are infected with hepatitis B, your baby is at risk of being infected when you give birth. An infected baby has a high risk of becoming a lifelong carrier of the hepatitis B virus. About a quarter of babies who are infected in this way develop serious liver disease in later life. If you are a carrier of hepatitis B, your baby can receive a course of hepatitis B vaccine which is very effective in reducing the baby's risk of becoming a lifelong carrier. Hepatitis B is an infection of the liver caused by a virus. You can have the virus but feel well. Most women who have hepatitis B probably caught it



from their own mothers at birth. You can also become infected through unprotected sex (that is, without a condom) with someone who is already infected, or by sharing needles when injecting drugs, or having a tattoo, or body piercing, with needles which have not been sterilised. All blood transfusions in the UK are screened for the virus and so it cannot be passed on in this way. Although 9 out of 10 adults who catch hepatitis B recover fully from the infection, up to one in 10 become lifelong carriers of the virus. If you are found to have hepatitis B infection, your doctor should offer the test to your partner and any other children you have, so that they can be offered vaccination if it is appropriate.

HIV

The HIV test is offered and recommended to all women in pregnancy because if you have HIV, you can pass the virus on to your baby while you are pregnant, when you give birth or by breastfeeding. If you have HIV infection you can receive special care and medicine to greatly reduce the chances of your baby becoming infected. Treatment may also help to keep you in better health. HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus), is the virus which causes AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). The virus gradually weakens the immune system, which makes it difficult to fight off infections. The most common way of becoming infected with HIV is

by having unprotected sex (that is, without a condom) with someone who already has HIV. You can also become infected with HIV if you share needles when injecting drugs, or have a tattoo or body piercing, with needles which have not been sterilised. All blood transfusions in the UK are now screened for HIV. The HIV test looks for antibodies to HIV. If the test is negative, it usually means that you are not infected with HIV. However, it can take up to three months for antibodies to develop, so if you think you may have been at risk of catching HIV recently, it is important to discuss this with your midwife.

Rubella (German Measles)

The reason for testing for rubella antibodies is different from the other tests described in this leaflet. It is not a test for infection in pregnancy but to see whether you are already protected against rubella. If you are found not to be protected, you will be offered MMR vaccine after your baby is born to protect you in future pregnancies.

Rubella is spread very easily from person to person as the virus is carried in the air. It is usually a mild disease, and it is not always possible to tell if someone has it. However, if you catch rubella in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, your baby is at very high risk of being infected and being born with serious defects of the brain, heart, eyes, and hearing.

The vaccine is very effective in protecting against rubella, but about one in 20 people who have had the vaccine will not be fully protected. So even if you have been immunised in the past, it is still important to have the blood test, and it is particularly important if you have never been immunised before.

Syphilis

Although syphilis is rare in the UK, testing is recommended during pregnancy because of the serious damage it can do you and your baby. It can be cured by treatment with antibiotics (usually penicillin) which will also treat infection in the unborn baby. If you do have syphilis, your baby will also be treated with antibiotics after birth to ensure s/he is clear of infection. Although most people who have syphilis are only unwell for a short time, it can eventually have very severe effects, such as brain damage, if it is not treated. If it is passed to the unborn baby it often results in miscarriage or stillbirth, or the baby is born early and severely ill. Almost all syphilis infections in the UK are caught by having sex, without a condom, with a person who is infected. If you have syphilis, your partner should also be offered a test.

Further information

If you would like further information about these tests or about the infections, please ask your midwife or doctor who will be able to advise you or tell you about other sources of information.

