What is Prenatal Screening?

Prenatal screening is testing typically offered to expectant parents in the 1st or 2nd trimester of pregnancy. The intent is to determine the probability that the baby has a chromosomal anomaly such as trisomy 21 (Down syndrome), trisomy 18 (Edwards syndrome), trisomy 13 (Patau syndrome), a neural tube defect like anencephaly or spina bifida, or other anomalies.

Common types of prenatal screening include:

- Cell-free fetal DNA testing - also called Noninvasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT) - screens fetal DNA in the mother's blood for chromosomal anomalies in the baby. Brands include MaterniT21 PLUS, Verify Prenatal Test, Harmony Prenatal Test, and Panorama Prenatal Screen. 10+ weeks
- Fetal nuchal translucency (NT) ultrasound to detect probability of Down syndrome. 11 – 13 weeks
- Maternal serum blood screening, which measures 3 - 4 specific proteins and hormones in the mother's blood. May be called triple screen, quad screen, or multiple marker screening test. 15 – 20 weeks
- Structural ultrasound, also called fetal morphology or anomaly scan, a sonogram to measure baby's organs and structures. ***Note: Ultrasound is often diagnostic for structural issues; parents must be aware of that in order to give informed consent to "routine" ultrasounds.*** 18 – 20 weeks

Is Prenatal Screening Diagnostic?

No. Noninvasive screening tests may indicate a probability or risk score that a baby has a chromosomal anomaly, but a definitive diagnosis can only be made through amniocentesis or CVS (Chorionic villus sampling), invasive tests that carry a slight risk of causing a miscarriage. Unfortunately, parents are not always adequately informed that screening tests are not diagnostic, and they may not fully understand to what they are consenting. Parents may also be unaware that there is no in-utero treatment for the vast majority of conditions that screening attempts to detect.

How Accurate is Noninvasive Prenatal Testing?

NIPT screening tests are name brand tests that are aggressively marketed to both doctors and expectant parents as being up to 99% accurate. However, independent laboratory studies have found that ***a positive result from an NIPT can be incorrect 50% of the time or more.*** There is also growing evidence that screening tests may deliver "false negatives" – in which the baby does in fact have a chromosomal condition that was not detected. (1)

In addition, NIPTs are not FDA approved or regulated. In 2022, **the FDA issued a warning to the public of the risk of false results, inappropriate uses, and inappropriate interpretation of NIPT results.** The alert said that manufacturer claims about performance and use may not be based on sound science.

What is Church Teaching on Prenatal Testing and Diagnosis?

Although prenatal screening/testing is not expressly prohibited, Catholics are strongly warned against an underlying "eugenic intention…that presumes to measure the value of a human life only within the parameters of 'normality'" (2) and states "***a diagnosis…must not be the equivalent of a death-sentence***." (3)

What is the Link Between Prenatal Testing and Abortion?

Most parents undergo prenatal screening or testing with no plan to abort based on the results, however, ***80% of parents who are told their unborn baby has a severe congenital anomaly decide to abort.*** (4)

Pressure to abort quickly is often intense, and is frequently couched in euphemisms like "saying an early goodbye", "early induction", and "preventing suffering". Parents may be rushed through the abortion process before they have time to make a sound moral judgement. (5) Catholic teaching is absolutely clear that procured abortion is always gravely immoral, and that even serious and tragic reasons "can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being." (6)