Newborn Hearing Screening Program

Why should newborn babies have hearing tests?
Hearing impairment is the most common childhood disability. Each year up to 400 babies may be born in Wisconsin with hearing problems. Hearing loss is easy to miss because babies cannot tell us that they are unable to hear.

Finding and treating hearing loss early is critical in helping a child learn speech and language. Babies learn to speak by listening. Babies with hearing problems who are treated by 3 months of age have better language skills than those treated after three months of age. Without newborn screening tests, hearing loss is usually not found until 2½ years of age and speech/language skills are delayed.

How can a baby’s hearing be tested?
There are two types of screening tests used. Your baby may have one or both of these tests.

Automated Auditory Brainstem Response (ABR):
Soft sounds will come through earphones to your baby’s ear. Tiny electrodes are taped to the baby’s skin that pick up the brainwaves to these soft sounds. The brainwave pattern is reviewed and compared to a normal pattern. If there is a match, the baby passes the test. If there is no match, the baby may be referred for more testing.

Otoacoustic Emissions (OAE):
A soft ear tip is placed into your baby’s ear. Bursts of noise will come through the ear tip and cause a sound to be produced in the ear canal. A tiny microphone in the ear tip picks up this sound. If these sounds are present, the baby passes the test. If the sounds are absent, the baby may be referred for more testing.

How long does the screening take?
The screening may take 15 minutes to 30 minutes and is done while the baby is resting, usually after feeding time.

Is the screening painful to my baby?
No. The test will be comfortable. Most babies sleep through the test.

Where is the test done?
A nurse or staff member does the test in a quiet area of the nursery.

When will I know the results?
Results of the screening are available right away. Your baby’s nurse will give you the results before you and the baby leave the hospital. The results will also be sent to your baby’s doctor.

What does Pass/Refer mean?
Pass means that the test suggests normal hearing at this time.
Refer means that more tests are needed. It does not mean your baby has a hearing problem. Many babies may need more testing just to make sure their hearing is normal.

What type of additional testing is performed and where is it done?
If your baby needs more testing an appointment will be made for another hearing test in about 2 to 3 weeks. It is very important that you bring your baby back for this repeat screening. Your baby’s doctor and/or the nursery staff will help you to schedule this.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem. Aurora Health Care is a not-for-profit health care provider and a national leader in efforts to improve the quality of health care.