There are a lot of wonderful plans to be made when you’re about to have a baby. There are also many important decisions that you’ll need to make along the way. One such decision involves an opportunity to have your baby’s hearing screened before going home from the hospital. If your baby is delivered at a Kaiser Permanente hospital or a hospital that has been approved to participate in the Newborn Hearing Screening Program, you might want to consider having your newborn’s hearing tested.

Why test a baby?

Hearing loss can be invisible, so your decision to have your baby’s hearing screened is vitally important. The first months and years of a child’s life are critical for developing communication skills and language. (The information on “Hearing and Speech: Ages and Stages” on the other side of this page lists some of the things most babies will do at different ages.) A baby who has a hearing loss may have difficulty developing normal language skills or may not do well in school. This is why it is important to identify the loss early and to provide special services to the baby and family. Technology now makes it possible to detect a hearing loss in the early days of a baby’s life. The American Academy of Pediatrics and other professional organizations recommend hearing screening for all newborns and encourage close monitoring of children’s hearing throughout the early years.

How many babies have a hearing loss?

Serious hearing loss is found in 2 to 4 babies out of every 1000 babies. About 50 percent of all babies with hearing loss have no known signs or risk factors (like serious illness or family history of deafness). Some babies may develop hearing loss later in life from repeated ear infections, meningitis, head injury, or other medical conditions. Sometimes babies lose their hearing and the reason is never known.

How do we screen hearing?

The newborn hearing screening takes place before you and your baby leave the hospital. The screening takes only a few minutes while your baby sleeps. Soft sounds are played through earphones specially made for babies. Your baby’s response to the sound is automatically measured. Today’s easy screening methods are very reliable. The cost of newborn hearing screening is covered as a Kaiser Permanente benefit. You will receive the results of the screening before you leave the hospital. Your baby will either receive a hearing screening pass or a hearing screening refer.

Hearing screening pass

This result indicates that your baby is able to hear normally in both ears at this time. It is important to pay attention to how your baby’s language and speech develop. If you have any concerns about your baby’s hearing, contact your baby’s doctor right away.
Hearing screening refer

This result does not necessarily mean that your baby has a hearing loss. Many babies need to repeat the screening. It is not always possible to get a good first screen. It is best to re-screen your baby between one week and one month of age. The hospital staff will make a re-screen appointment for you.

What can you do to prepare for your baby’s hearing re-screening?

It will be helpful if your baby is sleeping during the test. Some suggestions to help prepare your baby for the hearing re-screening include:

- Try not to let your baby nap before the appointment.
- Feeding your baby just before testing may help your baby sleep.
- Bring a blanket, extra diapers, change of clothes, and extra formula, if used.
- You can try to schedule your baby’s appointment for a time when your baby is likely to sleep.

What will happen after the re-screening?

You and your baby’s doctor will be given the results of the hearing re-screen. It is likely that your baby will pass the re-screen. A few babies will need a more complete diagnostic hearing evaluation.

Diagnostic hearing evaluation

If your baby did not pass the hearing re-screen, it is important to have a more complete hearing test as soon as possible to determine how your baby hears. A diagnostic hearing evaluation is another step in checking your baby’s hearing. The evaluation includes a number of tests to get a complete picture of your baby’s hearing. Your baby needs to sleep comfortably during most of the diagnostic hearing evaluation. (See the section above on “What can you do to prepare for your baby’s hearing re-screening?”)

After the evaluation you and your baby’s doctor will be informed of the results of the evaluation and receive a report. If a hearing loss is detected, you will be referred to special programs and community resources.

Birth to 3 Months

- Quiets to familiar voices or sounds
- Reacts to loud sounds: baby startles, blinks, stops sucking, cries, or wakes up
- Makes soft sounds when awake, baby gurgles

3 to 6 Months

- Turns eyes or head toward sounds, voices, noise making toys, dog barking
- Starts to make speech-like sounds, “ga,” “ooh,” “ba,” and p, b, m sounds
- Reacts to a change in your tone of voice

6 to 9 Months

- Responds to own name and looks when called
- Understands simple words, “no,” “bye-bye,” “juice”
- Babbles, “da da da,” “ma ma ma,” “ba ba ba”

9 to 12 Months

- Responds to both soft or loud sounds
- Repeats single words and imitates animal sounds
- Points to favorite toys or foods when asked

12 to 18 Months

- Uses 10 or more words
- Follows simple spoken directions, “get the ball”
- Points to people, body parts or toys when asked
- “Bounces” to music

18 to 24 Months

- Uses 20 or more words
- Combines two or more words, “more juice,” “what’s that?”
- Uses many different consonant sounds at the beginning of words, b, g, m
- Listens to simple stories and songs

2 Years to 3 Years

- Uses 2 to 3 word sentences
- At 2 years, people can understand what the child says some of the time (25 to 50 percent)
- At 3 years, people can understand what the child says most of the time (50 to 75 percent)
- Follows two-step instructions, “get the ball and put it on the table”

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This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your child’s physician or other medical professional. If your child has persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your child’s doctor.

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Hearing and Speech: Ages and Stages

Other resources

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org.
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

If you have any concerns about your baby’s hearing, contact your baby’s doctor or other medical professional.

Hearing screening is recommended for all newborns.