



Fetal Heart Monitoring in Labour

Fetal Heart Rate Monitoring During Labour

To check how your baby is doing during labour and birth, his or her heart rate is monitored with special equipment. This is called fetal heart rate monitoring. A major part of midwifery care in labour is to observe and record the fetal heart rate. This is one of the many ways to ensure that baby is healthy. While it is reasonable to assume that some form of fetal heart rate monitoring during labour has a beneficial effect, the relative advantages and disadvantages of the various methods will be discussed.

Types of Monitoring Available

There are two methods of fetal heart rate monitoring in labour. Auscultation is a method of listening to the baby's heartbeat. Electronic fetal monitoring is a procedure in which instruments are used to record the heartbeat of the baby and the contractions of the mother's uterus during labour. Either method can be done at set times during labour or nonstop throughout labour. The choice of which method is used depends on how your labour is going and your risk of problems.

Auscultation

Auscultation involves listening to your baby's heartbeat at set times. There are two ways of listening to the baby's heartbeat with auscultation:

1. A Doppler device is a small device that is pressed against your abdomen. This device uses a form of ultrasound to convert sound waves into signals of your baby's heart you can hear.
2. A special device like a stethoscope — called a pinards — is placed at the ear of your midwife. The open end is pressed on your abdomen.

Typically, the fetal heart rate is measured for one minute after a contraction, every fifteen minutes during the first stage of active labour, and every five minutes during the second stage.

Electronic Fetal Monitoring

Electronic fetal monitoring uses special equipment to measure the response of the baby's heart rate to the labour process. Electronic fetal monitoring can be external (outside), internal (inside), or both.

External monitoring. With this method, a pair of belts is wrapped around your abdomen. A transducer is used to pick up the baby's heartbeat and record it on a graph. Uterine contractions are also recorded with external monitoring.

Internal monitoring. For internal monitoring, a small device called an electrode is inserted through the vagina and placed on the baby's scalp. This device records the heart rate on a graph. Uterine contractions are also recorded with internal monitoring.

What Do Fetal Heart Rate Patterns Mean?

It is normal for a fetal heart rate to vary between 110 and 160 beats a minute. This is much faster than your own heart rate, which is about 60 to 100 beats per minute. Changes in the fetal heart rate that occur along with contractions forming a pattern. Certain changes in this pattern may suggest a problem. Abnormal fetal heart rate patterns do not always mean there is a serious problem. Other tests may be needed to get a better idea of what is going on with your baby.

What is the local policy?

In the Midwifery Led Unit, where low risk, normal labours are anticipated, intermittent auscultation is the method of choice. Research has shown that there is no value in electronic fetal monitoring for normal labours, as it may lead to an increase in caesarean sections with no improvement in outcomes. An admission trace is not used routinely as there is no evidence available to show its benefit.

Further Information

If you wish to discuss this in more depth, your midwife will be happy to do so.



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