Sweat Testing

Overview

Your baby's newborn screen test showed that your baby might have a disease called cystic fibrosis (CF). Your baby needs to have a test called a sweat test to find out if he/she has CF. The sweat test should be done in a Cystic Fibrosis Foundation accredited center to make sure that the test results are accurate. There are five of these clinics in Wisconsin. The sweat test can be done at any age. However, some babies may not make enough sweat to complete the test. If your baby does not produce enough sweat on the first sweat test, the test should be repeated once the baby is bigger. Plan to be at the clinic for about 2 hours. Parents will be with their baby the entire time the test is being done.

What happens during a sweat test?

The sweat test measures the amount of salt in the sweat. No needles are used and the test will not hurt your baby. In the first part of the test, a special chemical with no color and no odor that is known to cause sweating will be put on a small area on both of your baby's arms. A weak electrical current is then passed through the skin by attaching small electrodes to the arm with an armband. This causes a tingling feeling much like when your arm is "asleep." This part of the test takes 5 minutes. Paper pads are used to collect the sweat. The sweat will then be taken to a lab, where the rest of the test will be completed.

What will the sweat test tell me about my baby?

Children and adults with CF have an increased amount of sodium and chloride (salt) in their sweat. In infants, sweat test results can be normal (meaning your baby does not have CF), borderline (meaning the results of the test may be uncertain), or positive (meaning that your baby has cystic fibrosis). For individuals who have CF, the sweat test will be positive from birth. Once a test result is positive, it is always positive. Sweat test results do not change when a baby has a cold or other illness.

How do I prepare my baby for the sweat test?

Parents should not apply creams or lotions to the baby's skin 24 hours before the sweat test. There are no other special preparations before the test. There is no need to change the baby's diet or other activity. All regular medications may be used and will have no effect on the test results. Feeding your baby just prior to or during the test may help your baby to sweat. It also helps to have warm clothes or blankets to wrap your baby in during the test.

When will I know the results of the sweat test?

The lab will usually have the sweat test results ready for your doctor a few hours after the sweat is collected from your baby. The clinic where the sweat test is done will tell you how they will inform you of the test results.

Can the test results be uncertain?

In a small number of cases, the test results fall into the "borderline" range between not having CF and having CF. When this occurs, repeat sweat tests or blood tests may be done. These will only be done after talking to a doctor.