UK NSC recommendation on screening for vasa praevia

Following a review of the evidence against strict criteria, the UK NSC does not currently recommend screening for vasa praevia in the second trimester of pregnancy.

Vasa praevia is a rare but serious condition. It happens when the umbilical cord lies across the cervix (the entrance to the womb) during pregnancy. When this happens as the baby is born it can damage the blood vessels in the umbilical cord. This can lead to heavy bleeding and sometimes to the death of the baby.

If vasa praevia is found during pregnancy this allows planning of a caesarean section. This may increase the chance of survival for the baby.

This is why it has been suggested that screening all pregnant women for vasa praevia could be useful in finding which women might benefit from a planned caesarean section.

Key findings supporting the UK NSC recommendation

A national screening programme for vasa praevia is not recommended by the UK NSC as:

• there is not enough information about the number of babies affected by it in the UK
• vasa praevia can be found by ultrasound testing but it is not clear how accurate the test is and so some women may be advised to have an unnecessary early caesarean section, which brings risks to the baby

There is also a concern that ultrasound screening of the placenta and its blood vessels would find other, more common, conditions. For example, velamentous cord insertion (VCI) is a condition where the umbilical cord does not attach properly to the placenta. It is not known whether these would be a problem for the baby and doctors are not agreed on what advice to give women.

This could lead to a larger number of pregnancies considered at risk, making women and their family very anxious. It could also increase the number of unnecessary early caesarean sections.

The UK NSC regularly reviews its recommendations on screening for different conditions in the light of new research evidence becoming available.

To find out more about the UK NSC’s vasa praevia recommendation, please visit:

legacy.screening.phe.org.uk/vasapraevia

The UK National Screening Committee (UK NSC) advises ministers and the NHS in the 4 UK countries about all aspects of screening and supports implementation of screening programmes.

Find out more about the UK National Screening Committee at www.gov.uk/uknsc. The UK NSC evidence review process is described at www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-nsc-evidence-review-process and a list of all UK NSC recommendations can be found at legacy.screening.nhs.uk/recommendations

The UK NSC secretariat is hosted by Public Health England (www.gov.uk/phe).