

Decreased Fetal Movements

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Red Flags

- Patient concern regarding absent or decreased movements

Background – About Decreased Fetal Movements

- Maternal perception of decreased fetal movements (DFM) is a common reason for presentation to hospital.
- A reduction in stillbirth rates may be achieved by increasing awareness about the importance of DFM.
- DFM is associated with adverse pregnancy outcomes including stillbirth, fetal growth restriction, and preterm birth.

Assessment

1. Ask about fetal movements at every pregnancy visit. If patient is concerned about decreased fetal movements, ask **questions**.

Questions

- *How long has it been since you last felt your baby move?*
- *How long have the movements been reduced for?*
- *Have there been previous occasions of decreased movements?*
- *Do you have other symptoms such as abdominal pain or vaginal bleeding?*

2. Ask about **risk factors for stillbirth**.

Risk factors for stillbirth

- *Antepartum haemorrhage*
- *Assisted reproductive technology*
- *Cholestasis*
- *Diabetes (pre-existing or gestational)*
- *Extremes of maternal age (< 15 years or > 35 years)*
- *Fetal growth restriction*
- *Genetic factors or congenital malformation*
- *Hypertension*
- *Obesity or BMI > 30*
- *Placental insufficiency*
- *Previous episode of reduced fetal movements*
- *Previous poor obstetric outcome*
- *Pregnancy gestational age > 41 weeks*
- *Primiparity (first pregnancy)*
- *Racial or ethnic factors: Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, Pacific African, and South Asian ethnicities*
- *Rh isoimmunisation*
- *Smoking, alcohol abuse or drugs use*
- *Socioeconomic disadvantage/issues with access to care*
- *Trauma*

3. Examine patient including maternal heart rate, blood pressure, abdominal palpation, and symphysis-fundal height measurement.
4. If greater than 24 weeks gestation, check the presence of a fetal heartbeat with handheld doppler if available. Confirm it is different from the maternal heart rate.

Management

1. Provide all patients with verbal and written **information about fetal movements** early in pregnancy.

Information about fetal movements

- *Fetal movements can start to be felt in most pregnancies from 16 to 20 weeks.*
 - *If overweight or an anterior placenta, movements may be less able to be felt, but will start by 24 weeks.*
 - *While the nature of movements may change as pregnancy advances, there is no evidence that the number of movements changes.*
 - *There is no set number of fetal movements, patients should get to know the pattern of their baby's movements.*
 - *If there are concerns about fetal movements:*
 - *having something to eat or drink to stimulate the baby does not work.*
 - *patients should contact their antenatal provider immediately. They should not wait until the next day or appointment.*
 - *the use of kick-charts is not currently recommended as part of routine antenatal care.*
 - See [Your Baby's Movements Matter](#).
2. Emphasise the importance of maternal awareness of fetal movements at each pregnancy visit.
 3. If fetal movements have never been felt by 24 weeks of gestation, consider [urgent obstetric referral](#).
 4. If patient is concerned about decreased or absent fetal movements after 24 weeks of gestation:
 - Refer for [immediate obstetric assessment](#), even if a heartbeat is confirmed.
 - Advise patient they will have a fetal assessment at the hospital with a cardiotocography (CTG) and/or an ultrasound.
 - It is no longer recommended to advise women with decreased fetal movements to rest and monitor movements.

Referral

- If fetal movements have never been felt by 24 weeks of gestation, consider [urgent obstetric referral](#).
- If decreased or absent fetal movements at or after 24 weeks, refer for [immediate obstetric assessment](#), even if a heartbeat is confirmed.

Information

For health professionals

Further information

- Centre of Research Excellence in Stillbirth – [Raising Awareness and Improving Care for Women with Decreased Fetal Movement](#)
- Your Baby's Movements Matter – [Information for Clinicians](#)

For patients

Your Baby's Movement Matters:

- [Information for Women](#)
- [Your Baby's Movements Matter](#) [flyer]

References

Select bibliography

- [Decreased fetal movements](#). In: Maternity eHandbook. Victoria: Safer Care Victoria; 2018. [updated 2019 Jan 23].
- [Clinical practice guideline for the care of women with decreased fetal movements](#). Brisbane: Centre of Research Excellence in Stillbirth; 2017.

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