

RCN best practice



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Best practice guidance on
pregnancy testing prior to
diagnostic imaging



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With thanks to contributors from the RCN Imaging Forum.

Chair:

Edna Piper, *Modern Matron, Derriford Hospital, Devon.*

Lead contributors:

Caroline Rushton, *Nuclear Medicine Sister, Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust, Devon.*

Elaine Wright, *Radiology Nursing Manager, Princess Alexander Hospital NHS Trust, Essex.*

Other contributors:

Alison Creech, *Sister, Southmead Hospital, Bristol.*

Christopher Ennis, *Charge Nurse, Morriston Hospital, Swansea, Wales.*

Carole Ford, *Senior Sister, Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Trust, Cheltenham General Hospital, Gloucestershire.*

Angela Shash, *Senior Staff Nurse, Northampton General Hospital NHS Trust, Northamptonshire.*

Sarah Wilson, *Senior Nurse, St James's University Hospital, Leeds.*

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Best practice guidance on pregnancy testing prior to diagnostic imaging

Introduction

The RCN Imaging Nurses Forum committee promotes best practice within imaging and has produced these guidelines to provide direction on current best practice relating to pregnancy testing prior to diagnostic imaging.

The advice from the National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) concerning in utero exposures to ionising radiation is: “to prevent unnecessary exposure of the fetus when medical diagnostic procedures involving ionising radiation are indicated during pregnancy” (Sharp et al., 1998).

Prior to a diagnostic imaging procedure, it is essential that any female of reproductive age (between 12 and 55 years although local trust policy and guidance may differ) presenting for an examination involving exposure of the pelvic area or the administration of radioisotopes is asked if she might be pregnant.

- ◆ Where possible, an examination should be scheduled within 28 days of the onset of the last menstrual period.
- ◆ Where a high dose procedure is proposed, for example a pelvic CT or barium study, local policy may require the procedure to be completed within 10 days of the onset of the menstrual period.

If the woman cannot exclude the possibility of pregnancy then it should be ascertained if her period is overdue.

- ◆ Advice should be sought from the clinician authorising the investigation as to whether the investigation is justified by being of indirect benefit to an unborn child, for example an emergency procedure.
- ◆ If the period is not overdue (within 28 days of the onset of the last menstrual period) then a urine or serum test for pregnancy may be performed prior to the examination. These tests are highly sensitive

and are more likely to lead to a false positive than to an undetected pregnancy. Serum testing for pregnancy (quantitative) is known to be more reliable than urine testing. However, urine testing has a quoted sensitivity of 98-99 per cent.

- ◆ Should the woman's period be overdue and pregnancy is a possibility, a urine or blood test for pregnancy may be used with confidence. If possible, the procedure should be postponed until after the onset of the next menstrual period.

References and further reading

Sharp C, Shrimpton JA and Bury RF (1998) *Diagnostic medical exposures: Advice on exposure to ionising radiation during pregnancy*, Didcot, Oxon: NRPB (ISBN 0-85951-420-X). Available online at: http://hpa.org.uk/radiation/publications/misc_publications/advice_during_pregnancy.pdf (accessed 23 May 2006).

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