

# Pleural effusions

Information for patients



Leeds  
Maternity Care

This leaflet is aimed at pregnant women with an unexpected finding of a pleural effusion in their baby on ultrasound examination. The leaflet should only be supplied in supplement to a consultation with a senior obstetrician.

## **What is a pleural effusion?**

A pleural effusion (also called hydrothorax) is a buildup of fluid in the layer of tissue that surrounds your baby's lungs (the pleural space). In some cases, pleural effusion only affects one lung (25% of cases) and in other cases it affects both lungs.

In 50% of cases of pleural effusion there will be also be accumulations of fluid elsewhere in the baby such as in the baby's abdomen, around the heart or skin.

## **Why has it happened?**

We may not be able to find out the reason for the pleural effusion as this can sometimes happen without an obvious explanation. Your specialist doctor will check for possible causes during your Fetal Medicine appointment. A structural problem of the baby's lungs or heart might result in a pleural effusion, your doctor will be able to rule out these problems during your ultrasound scan and will organise an additional specialist scan called an echocardiogram.

Pleural effusions can sometimes be present because of a chromosomal or genetic problem in the baby.

There are a large number of different types of chromosomal and genetics problems, the most common of which is Down's Syndrome (also called Trisomy 21). This occurs when there is an extra copy of chromosome number 21 is present in the baby's cells.

The chances of a baby with a pleural effusion having an underlying chromosome abnormality are small but your doctor will discuss the option to have a test to check for chromosomal problems in the baby. It is completely up to you if you would like to consider this testing.

There are other rarer causes for pleural effusion including infection and anaemia (low blood count). You will be offered some additional tests to rule these problems out.

## **What does it mean for the baby?**

The outcome for the baby depends on the severity of the pleural effusion and the underlying cause. In more severe cases, when large effusions are present from an early point in the pregnancy, there may be an impact on the development of the baby's lungs. It can be difficult to predict exactly how the baby's lungs will function before he or she is born.

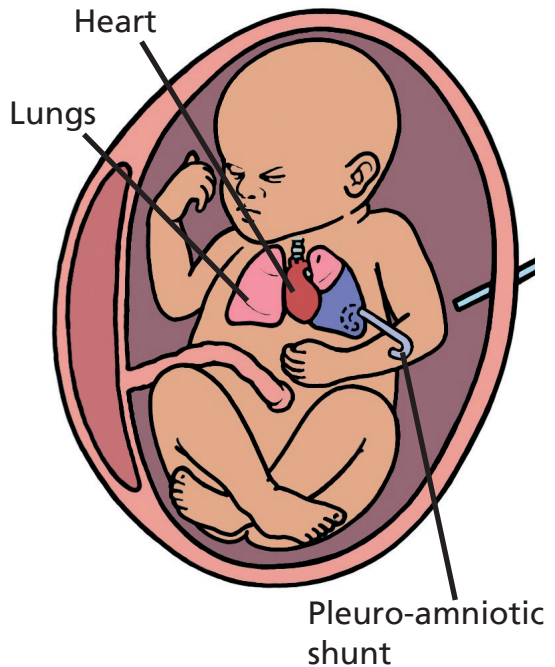
The chances of a baby with a pleural effusion having an underlying chromosome abnormality are small but your doctor will be able to discuss the likely outcome for your baby depending on the appearance on the ultrasound scan and the results of your tests.

## How can it be treated?

Pleural effusions can sometimes resolve by themselves during pregnancy. If the effusion is still there towards the end of your pregnancy then we will organise for you to meet with a neonatal doctor to discuss how the baby will be treated following delivery. We would advise that the baby is delivered in a hospital with neonatal services.

He or she may require a tube (called a chest drain) to be inserted into their chest wall after delivery to drain the fluid and help breathing.

A specialist procedure called a pleuro-amniotic shunt can also be performed during pregnancy to help drain the fluid before the baby is born. This may improve the outcome for your baby but is also associated with some complications such as miscarriage and preterm delivery. Your doctor will discuss this procedure with you in more detail if it is likely to be of benefit for your baby.



## **What happens next?**

Your local hospital will discuss your case and will refer you to the Fetal Medicine Unit at Leeds Teaching Hospitals for a specialist scan and discussion. You will be offered further tests and future appointments for scans.

## **Where can I get more information and support?**

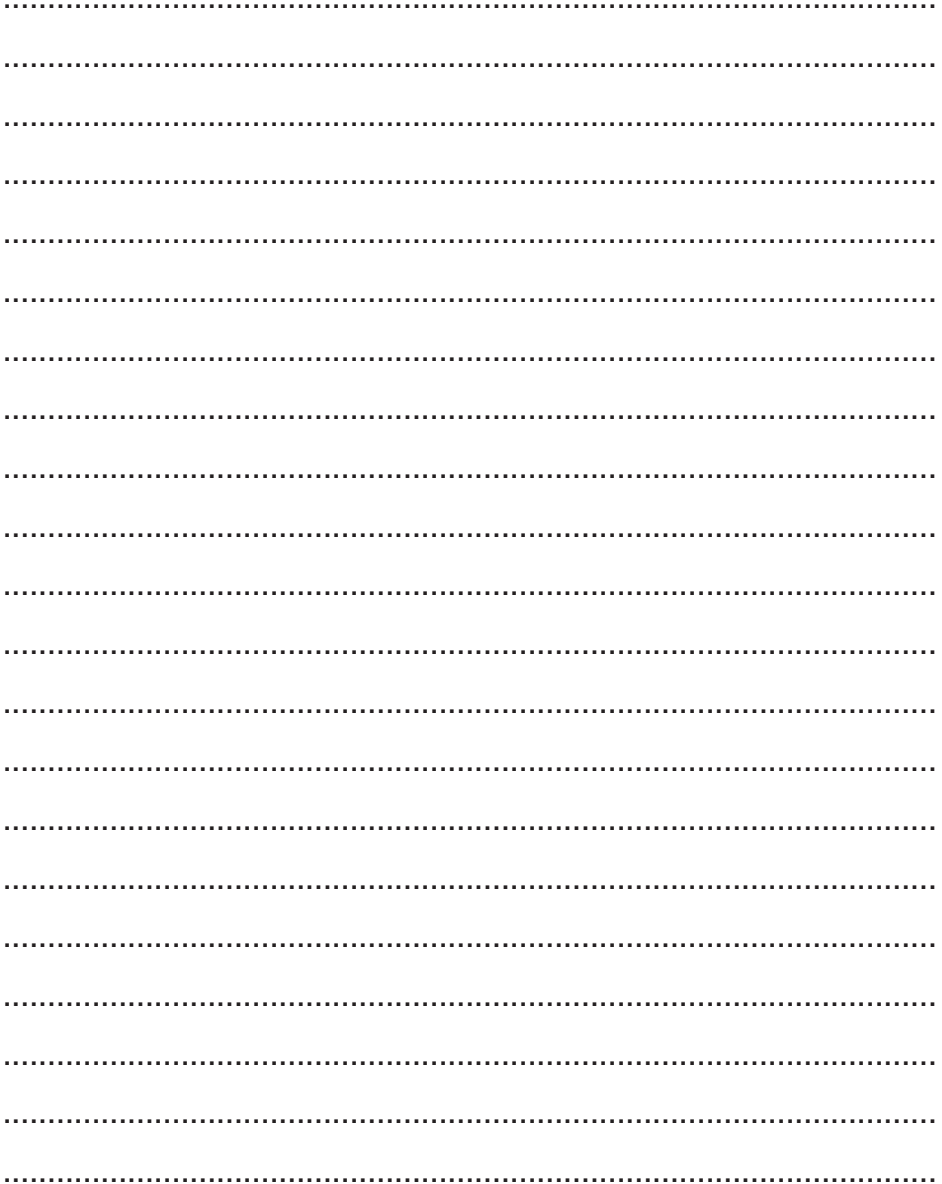
Be sure to ask questions to the doctor supplying you with this leaflet and make a note of any questions you would like to ask at your Fetal Medicine Unit appointment. Your local hospital will also have a specialist midwife who you will be able to contact for further discussion. Another helpful charitable resource is Antenatal Results and Choices.

### **Antenatal Results and Choices**

- [www.arc-uk.org](http://www.arc-uk.org)

# Questions / Notes

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....





**What did you think of your care?**

Scan the QR code or visit [bit.ly/nhsleedsfft](https://bit.ly/nhsleedsfft)

**Your views matter**



© The Leeds Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust • 2nd edition (Ver 2)  
Developed by: The Fetal Medicine Team  
Produced by: Medical Illustration Services  
MID code: 20200429\_026/MH

LN002407  
Publication date  
01/2021  
Review date  
01/2023