



It's critical that infants receive medical screenings after birth

BY NAOMIE WARNER D.O.



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Recent surges of home births are leading to newborns missing out on crucial tests conducted at hospitals after birth, including preliminary vision screenings.

Pew Research reported a 19% increase in home births nationwide in 2020, likely because of the COVID-19 pandemic. While safety for the mother and the child is always a valid concern, many families may not realize the importance of the screenings that take place at hospitals after birth and how not receiving these tests could lead to severe unwanted consequences for the child.

Like many other tests given to newborns, a vision screening's primary purpose is to detect issues that, if not found or treated at an early stage, could lead to permanent conditions and/or vision loss. However, in most cases, if they are caught when the child is a newborn, eye issues are much easier to treat and often result in few to no long-term side effects.

For example, these screenings are essential in the detection of Primary Congenital Glaucoma, a condition that affects one in every 10,000 babies from birth to 3 months old. Though the number of children affected every year might be lower, undetected and untreated Primary Congenital Glaucoma can lead to serious vision issues and blindness or even loss of an eye. Yet when detected and treated early, 80-90% of babies and infants react positively without further issues later in life.

At birth, a newborn's vision is between 20/200

and 20/400, often only being able to see up to 12 inches away. Their eyes are also uniquely sensitive to light, and their extraocular muscles still need time to strengthen. These factors often make it difficult for non-medical professionals to detect abnormalities in newborn vision, particularly without the proper tools, environment, or experience.

While vision screenings for newborns vary from state to state and can look different depending on the circumstances, there are some things that may be expected. The child's pupil response to light is a good indicator of eye health, and a physician will likely use a small light to test this.

The red-light reflex test can also determine if the anatomy of the eye is normal or if there is something blocking the vision, such as a cataract. Four in 10,000 children develop cataracts in the womb or early infancy that can cause irreversible blindness if not corrected in the first few months of life.

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them, including the first screening 12-48 hours after birth.

This being said, many mothers may feel more comfortable giving birth at home. This should not prevent them from seeking medical assistance and ensuring their child gets the necessary and essential screenings post-birth. Even if it appears that the child has no glaring issues, there are many factors to look out for that may not be obvious. Infant eye health can only be confirmed by a qualified professional and the universal screenings they can perform.

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