**What is echogenic bowel?**

Echogenic bowel is a bright area seen in a developing baby's intestine. This is found in 1% to 2% of pregnancies.

Ultrasound uses sound waves to safely look at your baby. Ultrasound images look brighter when sound waves connect with solid or dense areas of the body (like bone). Echogenic bowel simply means that the baby's bowel (intestines or gut) looks brighter than usual on the ultrasound. The bowel is called “echogenic” when it looks as bright as the baby's bones.

**What makes the bowel look bright?**

The muscles of the fetal bowel start to move at about 10 weeks in pregnancy. At that time, the fetus begins to swallow amniotic fluid and the fluid moves through the bowel.

Different things can make the baby’s bowel look bright on ultrasound.

- **Slowed or blocked bowel movement:** The bowel muscles may move slower than usual or start moving later than 10 weeks. There could be a part of the bowel that is blocked. Normal bowel contents can build-up when movement is slowed or blocked. This build-up looks bright on ultrasound.

- **Blood in the amniotic fluid:** Bleeding during pregnancy can leak blood into the fluid around the baby. This sometimes happens when a small part of the placenta breaks away from the uterus. It is not harmful for a baby to swallow fluid with blood in it. However, blood cells in the bowel look bright on ultrasound.

**Does an echogenic bowel go away?**

Echogenic bowel sometimes goes away, but it might not. There can still be a normal outcome even if the echogenic bowel does not go away.

**What is the chance for a health problem?**

The chance for a health problem varies and depends on you and your pregnancy history. Each pregnancy is unique. The chance is lower if echogenic bowel is the only ultrasound finding.

### Health problems seen with echogenic bowel

- Chromosome conditions
- Cystic fibrosis
- Fetal infection
- Intestinal blockage
- Poor fetal growth
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chance for health problems with echogenic bowel</th>
<th>What can influence the chance?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chromosome condition (like Down syndrome)</td>
<td><strong>Higher chance</strong> with other ultrasound findings and older age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Lower chance</strong> if you had a normal result from a prenatal screening test</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cystic fibrosis</td>
<td><strong>Lower chance</strong> if you had normal cystic fibrosis carrier testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fetal Infection</td>
<td><strong>Higher chance</strong> with other ultrasound findings</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intestinal blockage</td>
<td><strong>Higher chance</strong> if the bowel looks swollen or enlarged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor fetal growth or fetal loss</td>
<td><strong>Higher chance</strong> when prenatal screening markers suggest a chance for pregnancy complications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Will I be offered more testing?**

Yes. Tests are offered to help find the reason for the echogenic bowel. You can decide whether or not to have more testing. The type of testing depends on your medical history, your family history, and your ultrasound findings. You may be offered some or all of the following tests:

- **Screening tests**: Blood tests done on you can tell you about the chance for some health problems in the baby. You may have already had screening tests as part of your prenatal care. Blood tests do not usually give a final answer about the baby’s health. More testing is needed to diagnose cystic fibrosis, a chromosome condition, or an infection in the baby.

- **Amniocentesis**: This procedure is done by using a thin needle to remove a small amount of the fluid around the baby. The fluid is tested for chromosome conditions, prenatal infections, and cystic fibrosis, as needed. There is a small chance for miscarriage with this test.

- **Ultrasound**: A level 2 ultrasound carefully looks at the baby for other ultrasound findings. Ultrasound is able to find some birth defects and can watch the baby’s growth during pregnancy. You may be offered ultrasounds later in pregnancy if there are concerns about growth or an intestinal blockage.

**What if all the tests are reassuring?**

If all of the tests are reassuring, you can continue with routine prenatal care. You will most likely have a healthy baby. However, it is not possible to identify all problems during pregnancy.

**Where can I get more information?**

Talk with a genetic counselor for more information.

**Kaiser Genetics Departments:**

- Fresno/Modesto (559) 324-5330
- Oakland (510) 752-6298
- Sacramento (916) 614-4075
- San Francisco (415) 833-2998
- San Jose (408) 972-3300

**References:**

- UpToDate: Fetal echogenic bowel (2021)
- D’Amico et al. Outcome of fetal echogenic bowel: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Prenat Diagn. 2021

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional.