

**Information for couples where both  
partners carry Alpha Zero  
Thalassaemia**

*Including Information about Prenatal Diagnosis*

## Couple at risk for Alpha Zero Thalassaemia Major

	Name	Date of Birth
Ms		
Mr		

- *You both carry alpha zero thalassaemia. This means that, as a couple, you are at risk for having children with alpha zero thalassaemia major. This booklet explains about this risk, and how you can avoid it.*
- *Your full blood test results are given below.*
- *Keep this booklet with your personal papers, so that you can refer to it again. Show it to your doctor and midwife in every pregnancy.*

### Blood test results

Name	Date of Test	Hb	MCH	MCV	Hb A <sub>2</sub>	Electro-phoresis	DNA data*

*\* this is essential information for all couples at risk for alpha zero thalassaemia*

### Centre where tests were done

Address
<span style="width: 45%;">Telephone</span> <span style="width: 45%;">Fax</span>
Other

### Issued

Date
Signature of Doctor or Counsellor

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# Part 1.

## What is an “At Risk Couple”?

You both carry alpha zero thalassaemia. You are both healthy but you could have children with alpha zero thalassaemia major. This is why doctors call you an “at risk couple”. Your blood test results are written in the front of this booklet.

Alpha zero thalassaemia is one of a range of variations in the blood, that doctors call “*haemoglobin disorders*”.

### What are haemoglobin disorders?

Haemoglobin disorders cause changes in the haemoglobin in a person's red blood cells. They are *inherited* - they are handed on from parents to their children, they are present at birth, and they remain the same for life.

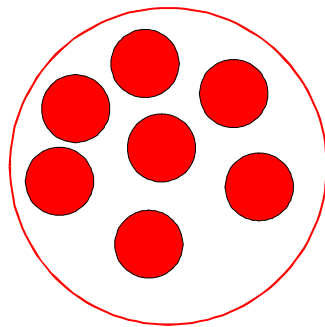
*Haemoglobin* is a component of the blood. It contains iron, which makes it bright red. This is why your blood is red. Your body needs oxygen to function: as your blood circulates haemoglobin picks up oxygen in your lungs and carries it round to all parts of your body. The usual type of haemoglobin is called haemoglobin A.

Haemoglobin is packed into *red blood cells*. Blood contains millions of red blood cells floating in a slightly yellow fluid called plasma.

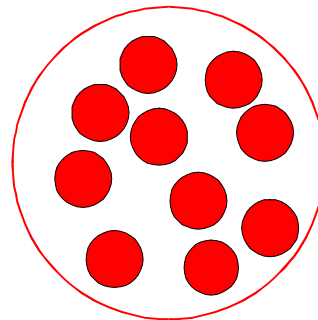
### What is Alpha Zero Thalassaemia?

Alpha zero thalassaemia carriers have smaller red blood cells than usual. They make up for having small red blood cell by making more of them.

The picture shows the usual kind of red blood cells, and a Alpha zero thalassaemia carrier’s red blood cells, seen down a microscope.



Usual red blood cells



An alpha zero thalassaemia carrier’s red blood cells

## How do you find out you carry alpha zero thalassaemia?

People find out they carry alpha zero thalassaemia through special blood tests. These are:

- a full blood count to measure the size of their red blood cells.
- measurement of amount of a haemoglobin called *haemoglobin A<sub>2</sub>* in their blood. People who carry alpha zero thalassaemia have less than 3% of haemoglobin A<sub>2</sub> in their blood. (This is the usual level of haemoglobin A<sub>2</sub>).
- a special “DNA test”. This is *absolutely necessary* to be sure that the type of thalassaemia you carry is alpha zero thalassaemia.

## How is Alpha Zero Thalassaemia inherited?

It is inherited through *genes*. Every human characteristic, such as eye colour, or height, or type of haemoglobin is controlled by genes that we inherit from our parents. A child inherits *two* genes for every characteristic, one from each parent. Most people have inherited two genes for *haemoglobin A*. This is the usual type of haemoglobin.

*An alpha zero thalassaemia carrier* has inherited a gene for haemoglobin A from one parent and a gene for alpha zero thalassaemia from the other. Their alpha zero thalassaemia gene cannot make any haemoglobin. Their normal haemoglobin A gene makes enough haemoglobin for their red blood cells to function normally.

*When both of a couple carry alpha zero thalassaemia* an baby could inherit an alpha zero thalassaemia gene from both parents. When a baby has *alpha zero thalassaemia major* neither of their haemoglobin genes functions normally, and their red blood cells contain very little haemoglobin. This causes a severe anaemia in the unborn child.

## What are your chances of having children with alpha zero thalassaemia major?

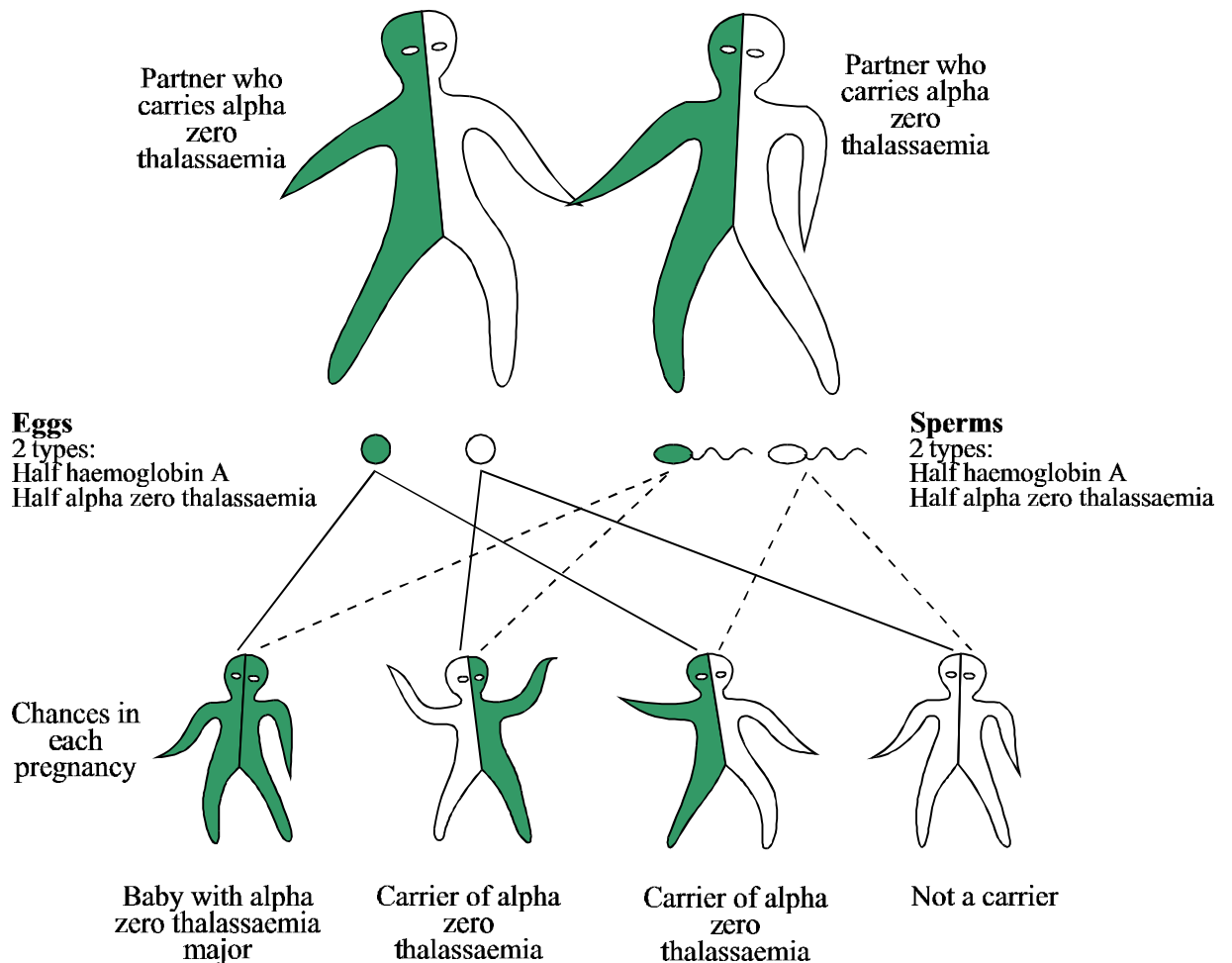
A couple who both carry alpha zero thalassaemia have the following chances *in each pregnancy*

- a 1-in-4 chance of a baby that is not a carrier.
- a 1-in-2 chance of a baby that is a healthy carrier of alpha zero thalassaemia.
- a 1 in 4 risk of a baby with alpha zero thalassaemia major.

*In every pregnancy your chance of having a healthy baby is much higher than your risk of having a baby with alpha zero thalassaemia major.*

## How could a child inherit Alpha Zero Thalassaemia Major from you?

When a child is conceived, it inherits one gene for haemoglobin from each parent. The picture shows that when both parents carry alpha zero thalassaemia there are three possibilities.



Women usually produce one egg each month. When a woman carries alpha zero thalassaemia, each egg contains either her normal haemoglobin gene or her alpha zero thalassaemia gene, but not both.

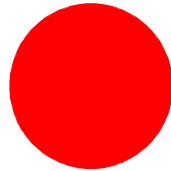
Men make sperm all the time. When a man carries alpha zero thalassaemia, each sperm carries either his normal gene or his alpha zero thalassaemia gene, but not both.

- If a normal egg is fertilised by a normal sperm, the child will not carry any haemoglobin disorder.
- If a normal egg is fertilised by an alpha zero thalassaemia sperm the child will carry alpha zero thalassaemia.
- If an alpha zero thalassaemia egg is fertilised by a normal sperm the child will carry alpha zero thalassaemia.
- If an alpha zero thalassaemia egg is fertilised by an alpha zero thalassaemia sperm, the child will have alpha zero thalassaemia major.

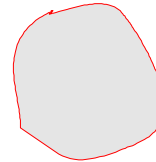
## What is Alpha Zero Thalassaemia Major?

*Alpha zero thalassaemia major is also called "Haemoglobin Bart's hydrops fetalis", and "alpha thalassaemia hydrops fetalis".*

Alpha zero thalassaemia major is a very serious anaemia that affects the unborn baby. A baby with alpha zero thalassaemia major cannot make haemoglobin normally. Instead its red blood cells contain mainly *haemoglobin Barts*, an abnormal haemoglobin that cannot carry oxygen properly. This causes a very serious anaemia while the baby is still in the womb.



**A normal red blood cell**



**An alpha zero thalassaemia major red blood cell**

When a baby has alpha zero thalassaemia major the pregnancy seems to go normally up to about 5 months, sometimes for longer. But then the baby stops growing properly, and the mother may develop high blood pressure. This can become severe and dangerous for the mother (this is called *eclampsia*). An *ultrasound scan* usually shows that the baby and the placenta are puffed up with water. Often the baby is born prematurely. It is usually dead or dying when it is born.

### Is there any treatment for alpha zero thalassaemia major?

It is possible to treat a baby with alpha thalassaemia major by giving a blood transfusion every month, for life.

There are three known cases where a baby with alpha zero thalassaemia major was delivered early and regular transfusions were started. All three children have survived. However, children saved in this way need life-long blood transfusions and other treatments. In addition, we cannot be confident that their growth and development will be normal.

To be truly successful, transfusion treatment should start at least three months *before* a baby is born. It is possible for a *highly expert specialist in fetal medicine* to give regular blood transfusions to a baby in the womb. This approach is experimental: so far only one or two babies in the world have had this treatment.

### What are the hopes for the future?

Some children who have been saved by starting regular blood transfusions in the womb might be "cured" later on, by bone marrow transplantation. The child must be given bone marrow taken from a healthy brother or sister who *exactly* matches their own tissue type. Each brother or sister has a 1-in-4 chance of being an exact match. Bone marrow transplantation also involves serious risks to the patient's life and health.

It might even become possible to save affected babies by *bone marrow transplantation during pregnancy*. This may need to be done very early in pregnancy. There has not yet been a successful case.

## **Finding out if your Baby is Healthy or has Alpha Zero Thalassaemia Major**

Most couples wish to know as early as possible whether their baby has alpha zero thalassaemia major or not.

You can find out early in pregnancy through *prenatal diagnosis*. This test can be done at any time after 11 weeks of pregnancy. If the baby does not have alpha zero thalassaemia major this is reassuring. If the baby has alpha zero thalassaemia major, the parents may choose to terminate the pregnancy and try again.

- Most couples at risk for alpha zero thalassaemia major ask for prenatal diagnosis in every pregnancy.
- Some couples decide not to have prenatal diagnosis because there is a small risk to the pregnancy, or for other reasons.

These decisions are both perfectly acceptable.

### **Are you interested in prenatal diagnosis?**

If you are interested in prenatal diagnosis, now or for the future, you should visit the prenatal diagnosis centre and talk with an expert counsellor. If you are unsure, a visit may help you to make up your mind. To make an appointment, phone the number on the front of this booklet directly, or ask your counsellor or family doctor to make an appointment for you.

*This is your decision, about your family. No-one will put pressure on you to doing anything you do not really want to do.*

### **Please come early!**

The staff of the prenatal diagnosis centre like to see “at risk” couples before they get pregnant, or as soon as they have started a pregnancy. You need time to decide whether you want prenatal diagnosis or not. Also, the test goes most smoothly when everyone is well prepared.

If you are planning to have a baby, and think you may want prenatal diagnosis, ask your family doctor or thalassaemia counsellor to make an appointment for you with the centre. You can also contact the centre directly to make an appointment.

If you are already pregnant and want to know more about prenatal diagnosis, contact the centre immediately. They will give you an early appointment, and will answer your questions and help you make the right decisions for yourselves and your baby.



# Part 2.

## Prenatal Diagnosis

Couples interested in prenatal diagnosis need to visit the prenatal diagnosis centre for a consultation. A separate visit is needed for the test (if you decide to have it).

### Visit 1 (allow about 1 ½ hours)

Both parents should attend, if possible. The counsellor will:

- *take blood from both parents for DNA tests*
- *discuss thalassaemia, present treatment, and hopes for the future*
- *discuss your risk and the advantages and disadvantages of the tests, and answer all your questions*
- *make up your medical notes*

If you are pregnant, the counsellor will:

- arrange an ultrasound scan to check the pregnancy
- explain which test would be best for you, based on the ultrasound scan
- help you make the best choice for yourselves
- make an appointment for the test, if you decide to have it

### Visit 2: The test (allow a whole morning)

You come to the *fetal medicine unit* at the hospital, in the morning. Ideally both parents come together. The fetal medicine team do an ultrasound scan to see exactly where the baby and the placenta are. Then they do the test that is most suitable for you. You are not put to sleep. You go home a few hours later.

## How is Prenatal Diagnosis done?

The test is done in one of two ways. In *chorionic villus sampling* a very small amount of tissue is taken from the placenta. In *fetal blood sampling* a very small amount of blood is taken from the baby. Tests can be done between 9 and 22 weeks of pregnancy (or even later) - but obviously the earlier the better. The right test for you depends on the stage of your pregnancy and the position of the placenta.

The material is used to examine the baby's haemoglobin genes. This is called "*DNA analysis*". This is the same test that was used to show you both carry alpha zero thalassaemia.

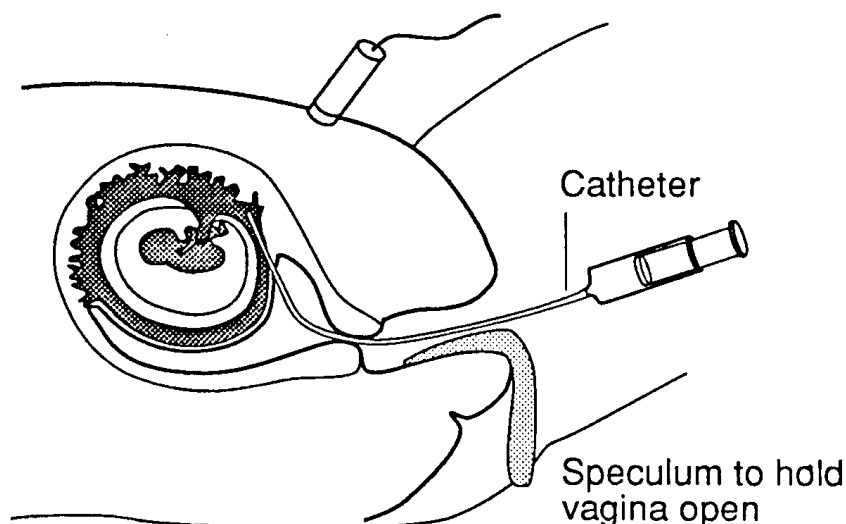
### Chorionic Villus Sampling

This test is called *CVS* for short. CVS can be done at any stage of pregnancy, but the best time is between 10 and 12 weeks after your last menstrual period (8-10 weeks after the child was conceived.) An early test is best, because if you consider terminating the pregnancy, an early termination is much less upsetting than a later one.

The obstetrician takes a small amount of material from the developing placenta. The placenta is where the baby is attached to the mother. It develops from the tissues of the baby, not the mother, so it has the same make-up as the baby. It is made up of "chorionic villi".

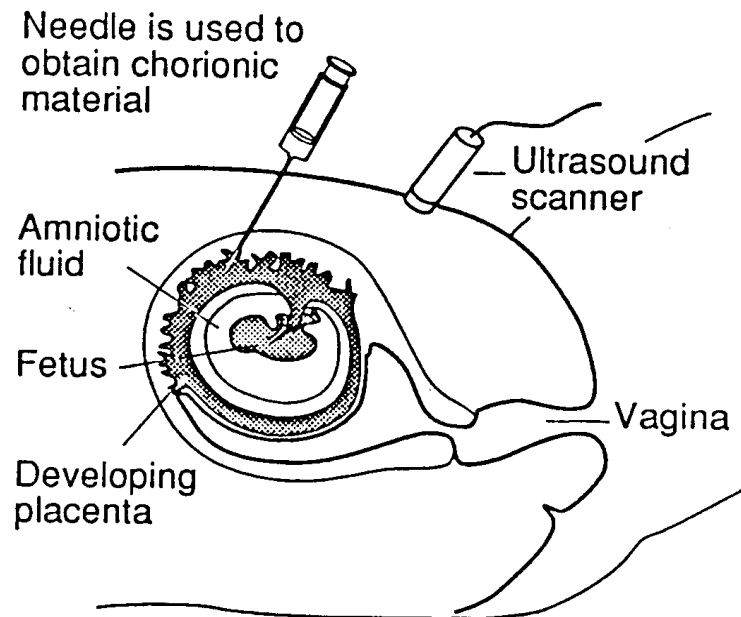
The obstetrician can obtain a sample of chorionic villi either through the vagina, or through the abdomen (tummy). The best method for you depends on the position of the placenta, and also on your preference. The team use an ultrasound scanner all the time, to see exactly what they are doing.

**CVS through the vagina.** The obstetrician puts a very thin plastic tube through the vagina and then into the womb. It is so thin that most women hardly feel it. It does not touch the baby or the little bag of water around it. Then the obstetrician attaches a syringe to the end of the tube and withdraws a very small amount of chorionic villi. This is also called *trans-cervical CVS*. The picture shows how it is done.



Sometimes it is not possible to reach the placenta through the vagina. Then it can be reached by putting a long thin needle through the tummy. The obstetrician injects local anaesthetic to "freeze" the skin before inserting the needle. The local anaesthetic stings and there is a brief feeling of pressure when the needle is put in, but there should be very little pain. When the ultrasound picture shows that the needle is in the

right place, the obstetrician fixes a syringe to it and withdraws some chorionic villi. This is called “*trans-abdominal CVS*”. The picture shows how it is done.



Once some tissue has been obtained, a member of the team immediately looks at it under a microscope to check that it is from the placenta. If it is, the procedure is finished. If it is not, the obstetrician moves the tube or needle slightly and tries again. It can take 2 or 3 tries to get the tissue. The test usually takes 10 to 20 minutes.

*After the test*, you rest in the hospital for about half an hour, and then go home. Take things easy for one or two days: this means you can go about as usual, but should avoid heavy work. Avoid sexual intercourse for 10 days after the test. If the test has been done through the vagina, you may see some blood spots for a few days. This is usually harmless. However, if there is a lot of blood, or if you have pain or fever, contact the team immediately at the phone number they give you at the hospital.

### **How is the chorionic villus sample tested?**

The genes for the characteristics we inherit, including haemoglobin, are made of DNA. Every tissue in the body contains the person's entire DNA pattern. In the fetus, this includes the placenta. The laboratory staff study the DNA from the chorionic villi, to see if the baby's haemoglobin genes will make the child normal or a carrier, or if the baby will have alpha zero thalassaemia. This usually takes about a week. The counsellor tells you the result as soon as possible, usually by telephone.

### **Is the DNA test accurate?**

DNA analysis is the best method for diagnosing inherited disorders. However, there is a small possibility of a mistake in every medical test. All human beings can make a mistake however careful they are. Rarely nature itself "plays a trick" that makes us make a mistake. So there *is* a chance of a mistake with this test, but it is very small, less than 1 in 400 (0.22%).

Also, if the male partner is not the real father of the baby, the result on the baby may not be correct. ***If the mother thinks there is any possibility that her partner is not the real father, she should tell the counsellor confidentially.*** Any such information be kept strictly confidential. It is only needed to avoid a mistake in the result.

## Is CVS safe?

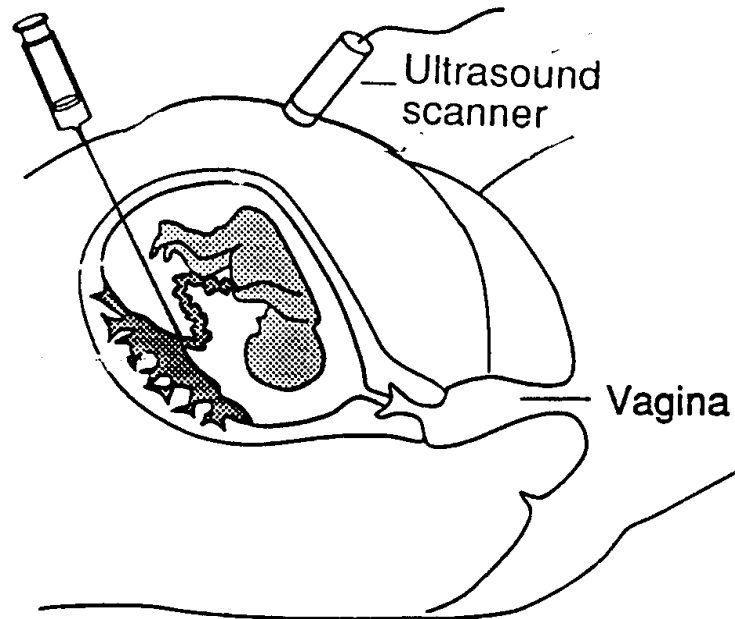
There is no risk to the mother. The main risk is that the test could cause a miscarriage. The doctors do the test as gently as possible, but anything that interferes with a pregnancy may cause a miscarriage. At the moment, when CVS is done before 12 weeks of pregnancy the risk of miscarriage seems to be around 1 in 50 (2%). When a miscarriage does occur, it can be difficult to tell whether it was due to the test or not, because many miscarriages happen naturally at around 12 weeks of pregnancy.

If CVS is done *very early* in pregnancy (before the 8th week after the last menstrual period) there may be an increased risk of a malformation of the limbs. There is no evidence of an increased risk of any malformation at all when CVS is done by an expert after the beginning of the 9th week of pregnancy. Therefore CVS is done only after the beginning of the 10th week of pregnancy, for extra safety. This is why we do an ultrasound examination before arranging the date for the test.

## Fetal Blood Sampling

In this test the doctors take **blood** from the fetus, at 18-22 weeks of pregnancy. They use this method when the pregnancy is advanced and the placenta is too far away for CVS. They also use it in rare cases when a DNA diagnosis is not possible.

The obstetrician puts a very thin needle through the tummy and takes a small amount of blood from the baby's cord, where it is attached to the placenta. The needle does not touch the baby itself. The team use an ultrasound scan all the time to guide the obstetrician.



After the test the woman rests for 20-30 minutes in hospital.

It takes about a week to get the result.

### How do the laboratory staff test the fetal blood?

Usually they test it by DNA analysis, as for CVS. If this is not possible for some reason, they test it by analysing the baby's haemoglobin directly.

### Is fetal blood sampling reliable?

The test is very reliable, but in every medical test there is always a small possibility of a mistake. There is about a 1 in 100 (1%) chance of a mistake.

### Is fetal blood sampling safe?

There is no risk to the mother. In about 1 in 100 cases however, a miscarriage will occur. This can happen from a few days to a few weeks after the test.

To keep the risk to the minimum, you should take things easy for one or two weeks after the test, avoiding tiring housework and carrying heavy objects like shopping or children. Avoid sexual intercourse for ten days after the test. If you notice any bleeding or discharge from the vagina, contact the team at once, at the number you have been given at the hospital.

## Termination of Pregnancy (Abortion)

If the test shows that the baby is affected, you may decide to end the pregnancy. This is done in one of two different ways, depending on the stage of your pregnancy.

### Early termination

This is possible if you are *less than 14 weeks pregnant*. It is quite quick and painless. You come into hospital one evening. The next day you are put to sleep as if you were having an operation. Your womb is emptied through your vagina. You can go home the next day.

A termination does not reduce your chance of having another baby. A few months later you can try again to have a healthy child, and you can have another prenatal diagnosis if you wish.

### Late termination

A different method has to be used if the woman is more than 14 weeks pregnant. The obstetrician injects a substance called *prostaglandin* into the womb. This brings on labour pains and starts a miscarriage. The labour lasts about 17 hours. You can have plenty of pain-killers and some anaesthesia, but of course this is much more upsetting than an early termination.

This type of termination does not spoil your chance of having other pregnancies. After some months you can try again to have a healthy child. But remember prenatal diagnosis can be done early, at about 11 weeks of pregnancy. *As soon as you are pregnant*, ring the number at the end of this booklet to arrange an early visit for counselling.

# Part 3.

## Other Choices for At-Risk Couples

### Pre-implantation diagnosis

People often ask for a better solution than prenatal diagnosis. Now there is promising research on *pre-implantation genetic diagnosis*. If this research is successful, it will allow couples who both carry alpha zero thalassaemia to start a pregnancy knowing that the baby will not be affected.

This research is in the very early stages. Even if it shows that pre-implantation diagnosis is possible for most couples at risk for serious haemoglobin disorders, it may not become widely available, because it is expensive. It is likely that it will only be available as a private service for quite a long time.

### How can people do pre-implantation diagnosis?

There are several possible ways. They all use in vitro fertilisation methods and DNA analysis. Here we outline one possible method.

The woman has medical treatment to make her produce several eggs. The eggs are collected, and DNA methods are used to identify eggs that do *not* carry thalassaemia. These eggs are fertilised using the partner's sperm, and two or three are placed in the woman's womb. In young women this gives about a 1 in 3 (33%) chance of a pregnancy. It is necessary to confirm a pre-implantation diagnosis by doing CVS at 11 weeks.

At the time of writing (March 1998), world-wide there are four couples with a pregnancy continuing after pre-implantation diagnosis for a different haemoglobin disorder, beta thalassaemia major.

### Other possibilities

There are other possibilities, but people rarely choose them.

An at-risk couple could *choose to separate*, and each find a partner who does not carry alpha zero thalassaemia (a carrier and a non-carrier cannot have a child with a serious haemoglobin disorder). Very few couples who are considering marriage, or who are already married when they discover the risk, make this choice.

They may choose *not have children, or adopt a child*. This is a difficult and very uncommon choice.

They may choose "*assisted reproduction*" to have an unaffected child. There are two ways to do this.

*Artificial insemination by donor*. The woman may be given sperm from a man who is not her husband. (The "donor" man must be tested and must not carry a haemoglobin disorder.)

*Egg donation*. The husband's sperm can be used to fertilise eggs taken from another woman. (The "donor" woman must be tested and must not carry a haemoglobin disorder). The fertilised eggs can then be placed in the woman's womb. If the woman becomes pregnant, the baby is her husband's child because he gave the sperm, and her own child because she carries it through pregnancy.

Several attempts are usually needed, and even then there may not be a pregnancy. Assisted reproduction is expensive, and is not generally available on the National Health Service. However, it is the right approach for some couples, and can be arranged privately: ask the counsellor for more information.