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To cite this article: Vicky Hsieh, David M Sherer, Kateryna Davydovych, Mila Kheyman & Mudar Dalloul (2025) The Art (and Science) of Individualized Selection of Non-Invasive Prenatal Screening (NIPS), International Journal of Women's Health, , 1271-1283, DOI: [10.2147/IJWH.S437214](https://doi.org/10.2147/IJWH.S437214)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.2147/IJWH.S437214>



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Published online: 06 May 2025.



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The Art (and Science) of Individualized Selection of Non-Invasive Prenatal Screening (NIPS)

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Abstract: Non-invasive prenatal screening (NIPS), utilizing cell-free fetal DNA (cffDNA), has revolutionized prenatal care, transitioning from primarily detecting common fetal aneuploidies to encompassing detection of an increasingly broader spectrum of autosomal dominant and recessive conditions. This Commentary delves into the evolution of NIPS, emphasizes the importance of individualized selection of NIPS strategies based on specific clinical scenarios including patient characteristics, and explores its applications beyond aneuploidy screening. The optimal NIPS strategy should be carefully selected based on individual patient factors, including the specific clinical indications, maternal characteristics such as BMI, medical history, medication use, history of previous pregnancies, fetal characteristics such as multiple gestation or suspected anomalies, and the available NIPS technologies. There are also considerations in choosing between MPSS and SNP-based NIPS based cffDNA screening technologies. NIPS is a screening test; hence, diagnostic testing remains crucial for confirmation of any abnormal screening results. Notwithstanding, NIPS has significantly transformed prenatal care, offering valuable insights into fetal health and enabling earlier identification of potential risks. By carefully considering individual patient factors and selecting the most appropriate NIPS strategy, clinicians have the ability to maximize the benefits of this innovative technology while minimizing potential limitations. Continued research and technological advancements will further refine NIPS and expand its applications in the future.

Plain Language Summary: Development and implementation of NIPS has truly revolutionized the field of prenatal screening and prenatal care. This technology has the potential to remove barriers for patient access and provide early and accurate risk assessment for all pregnancies. Through continued research and progress for more methods of utilizing cffDNA technology in a variety of situations, there are now complexities in the selection of the optimal cffDNA screening approach depending on the clinical scenario. Insurance coverage is often also worthy of consideration for patients. It is important to note that insurance (at least in the United States) will often only cover one aneuploidy screening per pregnancy. Therefore, it is important to select the most appropriate test at the forefront. This commentary has outlined common situations where the prenatal care provider may require guidance in selection of the optimal screening NIPS for their patients.

Keywords: cell-free fetal DNA, noninvasive prenatal screening, prenatal care, fetal aneuploidy

Introduction

Non-invasive Prenatal Screening (NIPS, also known as NIPT) refers to a form of prenatal screening for chromosomal aneuploidies that has revolutionized prenatal care by allowing early detection of fetal chromosome anomalies. Trisomy 21, Trisomy 18, Trisomy 13, and sex chromosome aneuploidies have historically been viewed as common chromosomal aneuploidies with the potential to reach viability.¹ Trisomy 16 and Trisomy 22, on the other hand, are considered common chromosome abnormalities often associated with first-trimester pregnancy losses. It is estimated that between 20% and 25% of all first-trimester pregnancy losses are the result of Trisomy 16 or Trisomy 22.² Before the development

and widespread adaptation of NIPS, maternal serum screening was the main screening method for fetal aneuploidies beginning in the mid-1980s. Maternal serum screening utilizes maternal serum analytes to provide a risk evaluation for fetal aneuploidy. Such testing has a sensitivity ranging from 80% to 90% but low specificity. Of note, maternal serum screening involves a predetermined 5% false positive rate.^{3–5} Therefore, before the development of NIPS, invasive diagnostic procedures such as amniocentesis and chorionic villus sampling were widely used in the prenatal testing landscape.

The concept of utilizing fetal cell free-DNA (cfDNA) circulating in maternal blood for prenatal testing was first proposed in the late 1990s by Dennis Lo, a clinical scientist at the University of Hong Kong.⁶ It was not until the early 2000s that the development of massively parallel shotgun sequencing (MPSS) technology provided the necessary tools for detecting and analyzing fetal cfDNA in maternal circulation.^{7–9} The first successful application of utilizing cfDNA for the detection of aneuploidy was published in 2007.¹⁰ The method of using MPSS on circulating cfDNA of placental origin for the detection of fetal chromosomal abnormalities was replicated across different laboratories and has become the dominant approach for screening for fetal aneuploidies.

Such testing was coined “Non-invasive prenatal testing” or NIPT. This methodology became commercially available by the early 2010s.¹¹ In 2013, the American College of Medical Genetics and Genomics (ACMG) issued guidelines supporting the use of NIPT for pregnancies at increased risk for fetal aneuploidies.¹² By 2016, NIPT had revolutionized the prenatal care landscape and became a routinely utilized test widely covered by insurance in the United States for high-risk patients. Around this time, the test was renamed as “Non-invasive prenatal Screening or NIPS” to reflect its screening (and not diagnostic) nature to avoid potential confusion among patients and clinicians. NIPS has much higher sensitivity and specificity for the detection of fetal chromosome aneuploidies than traditional maternal serum screening.^{13–15} Perhaps trivially, NIPS is also able to correctly identify fetal sex as early as 9–10-week gestation and has been welcomed by many. By 2020, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists (ACOG) issued an updated guideline supporting the use of NIPS for all pregnancies.¹⁶ Notably, following the widespread application of NIPS, invasive diagnostic testing rates have decreased across the US.¹⁷

Amniocentesis and CVS are two diagnostic procedures that can be performed in pregnancy to obtain cells from the amniotic fluid or placental trophoblasts. In the age of widespread use of NIPS, arguments have been made regarding the utility of CVS in diagnosing chromosomal aneuploidies since NIPS and CVS both obtain cells of placental origin.^{18,19} Amniocentesis is considered the gold standard when it comes to the evaluation of fetal chromosomes and mosaicism.²⁰ Mosaicism has been identified as a limitation of NIPS due to origin of cfDNA. It is important to distinguish here that NIPS is considered screening when it comes to chromosome aneuploidies and diagnostic procedures should be offered in patients who screened high-risk or positive by NIPS.²⁰ Long wait times and limited availability of additional resources to high-risk obstetric providers may hinder patient care.²¹ This is precisely where considerations of different types of NIPS may have a place in patient management. NIPS can be performed as early as 9 weeks’ gestation, or around the same time patients would be obtaining a first dating sonogram. Thus, it can be a useful tool in determining risk levels in early pregnancy.

MPSS vs SNP-Based NIPS

There are two primary methods used for NIPS, Massively parallel shotgun sequencing (MPSS) and single nucleotide polymorphism (SNP)-based sequencing. There are benefits and limitations to both methods.

MPSS sequences the entirety of all fragments of cfDNA found in maternal circulation. This includes cfDNA of maternal and placental (“fetal”) origin. Maternal cfDNA originates from maternal adipose tissue and fetal cfDNA originates from placental trophoblasts. This method has the potential to provide a comprehensive analysis of copy number variants across the fetal genome and can detect a wider range of chromosomal abnormalities such as micro-deletions and microduplications of varying sizes depending on the analysis platform. It can also be used more narrowly to focus on common chromosome aneuploidies.^{7–9,14,16,22,23}

SNP-based sequencing technology emerged as an alternative to MPSS in 2012. This method focuses on specific genetic markers that are known to be different between maternal and fetal DNA and provides a snapshot of the nucleotide at each specific location. Since the main application of NIPS is for the detection of common chromosome aneuploidies, the SNPs used in this method have been concentrated on chromosomes 13, 18, 21, X, and Y. This method may or may

not offer slightly better sensitivity and specificity for common chromosomal abnormalities but has limitations in detecting other copy number variants across other chromosomes. SNP-based technology may be less expensive than MPSS-based technology due to its more targeted approach.^{24–30}

Both methods offer high sensitivity and specificity rates when it comes to common chromosome aneuploidies such as Trisomy 21, Trisomy 18, and Trisomy 13. The choice between the two methods often depends on other clinical indications, the desired level of sensitivity, and the available resources for the patient. This commentary will address matters worthy of consideration in different clinical conditions.

Whole Genome Screening

In clinical situations where a non-specific birth defect or growth restriction has been identified and a patient already had low-risk NIPS for aneuploidy, a rare chromosome aneuploidy or a microdeletion/microduplication may be suspected. It should be noted here that diagnostic testing remains the standard and the recommended method for the evaluation of a fetus with congenital anomalies. However, in situations where diagnostic testing is not possible or when a patient declines invasive testing, genome-wide NIPS should be considered.²³

Genome-wide NIPS refers to the use of MPSS technology to screen for chromosomal gains and losses across the genome.^{23,31} Large microdeletions and microduplications of greater than 3-5Mb can be detected using this method, however, only copy number variants larger than 7Mb are reported. This can be a powerful screening tool in the absence of other testing.²³ A copy number variant larger than 7Mb has a high potential of being pathogenic.

Balanced Translocation Carriers

MPSS-based cfDNA screening may also be offered to patients with large balanced translocations where a fetal unbalanced translocation may be detected. Patients should be counseled on the screening nature of NIPS and the limitations of not performing diagnostic testing. In situations where a known balanced translocation exists in the family, genome-wide NIPS may be able to provide the patient with pertinent answers sooner than diagnostic CVS testing.^{32,33} Srebnik et al suggest that NIPS more readily detects familial unbalanced translocations compared to de novo aneuploidy.³² A report of the familial balanced translocation should accompany the test requisition to ensure the technology has the capability of detecting unbalanced translocations of the size and location in question. It is advised to contact the cfDNA screening laboratory prior to sending the sample to confirm their ability to detect an unbalanced translocation of the specific size and location.^{32,33}

The 2–3-week difference in obtaining results drastically decreases patient anxiety, especially when the patient has experienced previous recurrent early pregnancy losses. Diagnostic testing is recommended following the cfDNA screening for confirmation.^{32,33}

Twins

Twin pregnancies carry increased obstetric and fetal risks compared to singleton pregnancies. Twin pregnancies increase the maternal risk for gestational diabetes, gestational hypertension, preeclampsia, hemorrhage, and early delivery.¹ These risks also vary depending on whether the twins are monochorionic or dichorionic. Monochorionic twin pregnancies are at increased risk for twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome (TTTS), twin anemia-polycythemia syndrome, and twin reversed arterial perfusion.^{1,34} These conditions can cause fetal growth restriction, growth discordancy and even fetal death. In general, dichorionic twins have lower risks for obstetrical complications compared with monochorionic twins but the risks remain considerably increased in comparison with singleton pregnancies.^{1,35} All dizygotic twins and 25% of monozygotic twins are dichorionic.^{34,36}

Due to the differences in risk level when it comes to monochorionic vs dichorionic twin pregnancies, SNP-based NIPS should be considered for twin pregnancies as it is also able to identify the zygosity.^{35,37} In prenatal units where early sonograms can identify the chorionicity and amnionicity of twin pregnancies, the importance of using NIPS to identify zygosity may be overlooked. Since sonograms can be operator-dependent in their accuracy and not all patients have access to early sonograms, an SNP-based NIPS can be a powerful tool in determining whether a twin pregnancy could be at risk for TTTS and whether high-risk monitoring protocol should be initiated.^{34,38} Furthermore, determining

zygosity may be helpful in providing the risk for suspected genetic disorders, in one or both of the fetuses, in the presence of abnormal ultrasound findings.³⁴

Since the fetuses in monozygotic pregnancies have identical DNA, SNP-based NIPS would only see a maternal DNA profile and one fetal profile. Dizygotic twin pregnancies are the product of two eggs being fertilized by two separate sperms, the SNP-based NIPS would see a maternal DNA profile and two fetal profiles. SNP-based NIPS is highly accurate in determining the zygosity of twin pregnancies.^{36,37} This method of testing is available to all patients where blood can be drawn and the analysis is not operator-dependent. SNP-based NIPS should be considered in known twin gestations.

Vanishing Twin

Vanishing twin pregnancies occur when one of the fetuses in a multifetal pregnancy ceases to develop and is reabsorbed. This typically occurs early in the first trimester.³⁹ Depending on the timing of blood draw for cfDNA screening for aneuploidy, there is a potential for residual cfDNA from the vanished twin to still be present in maternal circulation weeks after the fetal demise.^{39–41} The presence of cfDNA from the vanished twin can potentially lead to inaccurate results, as fetuses with a chromosome aneuploidy have an increased risk of being non-viable, especially early in the first trimester. This may lead to false positive or inconclusive results.^{39,42}

An SNP-based aneuploidy screen has the potential to detect a vanishing twin pregnancy, even in the absence of sonographic data to suggest the occurrence. An SNP-based screen can report on the presence or absence of an additional DNA profile when a singleton pregnancy is reported.³⁹ However, aneuploidy risks are often not evaluated in these scenarios. These reports often solely flag and report on the additional DNA profile attributing to triploidy or vanishing twin, not the aneuploidy risk.

An MPSS-based approach, on the other hand, will not identify the presence of additional DNA profile but it will provide an aneuploidy risk. Although the report provided can have a higher chance false positive with low positive predictive value or be inconclusive.^{39,42–44}

CfDNA screening for aneuploidies is unable to determine whether the vanished or surviving twin has a suspected aneuploidy.⁴¹ Diagnostic testing is strongly recommended in cases of a positive result from MPSS-based screening, although patients should be counseled on the increased chance of a false positive result. Patients are also encouraged to inform providers if an early sonogram suggested a twin gestation so that SNP-based aneuploidy screening can be performed.

Triplet and Higher-Order Multiples

In the United States, multifetal pregnancy rates have increased significantly in recent decades attributed to the introduction of assisted reproductive technology (ART) and older maternal age at conception.^{45,46} Higher-order multiple pregnancies are associated with a higher risk of maternal and fetal morbidity and mortality compared to twin and singleton pregnancies.⁴⁷

NIPS has not been validated for triplet or higher order pregnancies due to the limited data available.⁴⁶ Few studies have been published assessing the performance of MPSS NIPS on triplet pregnancies. Available studies suggest that the performance of NIPS is comparable between singleton and multifetal gestations if sufficient fetal fraction is present.^{46,48} Currently, the MPSS platform is the only platform able to evaluate triplet pregnancies.⁴⁹ SNP-based platforms cannot currently accept triplet pregnancy samples.^{39,50} Fetal sex determinants will likely only be able to specify whether Y chromosome material is detected and not state how many of the fetuses are expected to be male or female.

Currently, pregnancies with four or more fetuses cannot be evaluated through cfDNA screening.⁴⁸ These patients should be counseled specifically about the lack of aneuploidy screening technologies available, as maternal serum screening also has similar limitations. Sonography and diagnostic testing remain their only method for aneuploidy evaluation.

Triploidy

Triploidy is a rare chromosomal condition where a fetus has three sets of chromosomes instead of two sets.^{25,51} Instead of 46 chromosomes total, fetuses with triploidy will have 69 chromosomes. The estimated incidence of triploidy is 1–3% and can represent up to 20% of first-trimester pregnancy losses.⁵¹ Triploidy is often caused by a sporadic event where an

error in cell division in the gametes causes the embryo to receive a whole extra set of chromosomes.^{25,51} Triploidy pregnancies rarely carry to term. Most triploid fetuses that are alive at birth are mosaic for the condition, have severe malformations, and rarely survive infancy.⁵² Paternal triploidy can lead to a large cystic placenta with a risk of malignancy.^{39,52} Due to this risk, additional testing is often recommended when triploidy is identified to assess whether it is of paternal or maternal origin. Management may differ depending on the result.

SNP-based NIPS is the only NIPS able to screen for triploidy, with a 5-10% PPV.^{13,25,52} Since triploidy causes a balanced and proportional increase across all fetal chromosomes, MPSS-based NIPS is unable to identify the condition.⁵² Thus, in cases where triploidy is suspected or if a patient has a history of triploidy, SNP-based NIPS should be considered for the patient for screening. Since triploid pregnancies rarely survive the first trimester, whether screening for triploidy should be performed for all patients as baseline screening remains at the individual provider's discretion.

IVF Pregnancies

In vitro fertilization (IVF) is the most common form of assisted reproductive technology (ART). Individuals can pursue this method of conception for a multitude of reasons, including advanced maternal age, recurrent pregnancy loss, infertility, and increased risk for certain genetic conditions.⁵³ The first step of IVF is retrieving eggs and sperm. Then, the gametes are combined by insemination or intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI). After fertilization, the embryos are cultured before being transferred into the gestational carrier. Prior to embryo transfer, there is an optional step of pre-implantation genetic testing (PGT) that can be done by blastocyst biopsy at 5–6 days. For an additional cost, the embryo can be tested for aneuploidy (PGT-A); monogenic disorders (PGT-M); structural chromosomal abnormalities such as chromosomal translocations, inversions, deletions, and insertions (PGT-SR); and polygenic conditions (PGT-P). The procedure involves removing 5–10 cells from the trophoctoderm (which eventually becomes the placenta). PGT-A is the most commonly performed test, the goal is to select the embryo with the highest likelihood of a successful implantation/pregnancy.⁵³ It is important to understand that PGT is considered screening. The biopsied cell population might not be representative of the entire embryo since mosaicism is observed more frequently in early embryos. Furthermore, the inner cell mass is untouched; therefore, placental mosaicism is another limitation of this testing. Since PGT is screening, diagnostic testing should still be offered during pregnancy.⁵³

While maternal serum screening can be performed for IVF pregnancies, some studies have identified an association with alternate serum marker levels, which may lead to a higher rate of false positive results.^{54,55} NIPS can also be performed in this population; however, fetal fraction has been shown to be lower.^{56,57} While 95% patients will receive a result on their first attempt, it is important to discuss these factors prior to screening.⁵⁶ MPSS NIPS is the preferable option since it is less sensitive to lower fetal fractions.

While some studies have identified an increased incidence of imprinting disorders after IVF and ICSI,^{58–60} other studies have disputed this.^{61,62} MPSS and SNP NIPS cannot identify methylation defects since they do not result in copy number variants. Genome-wide NIPS should be considered in IVF pregnancies for the most comprehensive screen of overall copy number variants.

SNP-based cfDNA screening offers an effective method for confirming the biological parentage of embryos in IVF pregnancies. By analyzing the SNPs, this approach provides information regarding the maternal parentage of embryos, verifying the correct embryo was transferred. This technology may be valuable in cases of embryo freezing, ensuring that the transferred embryo aligns with the intended genetic material. Notably, incorrect maternal parentage is often implied and not explicitly reported.

Blood Transfusions and Transplant Recipients

Cell-free DNA refers to DNA fragments released into the bloodstream from cell turnover or cellular damage. In the case of a transplant recipient, whether organ transplant, stem cell transplant, or blood transfusion, the recipient would have circulating cfDNA from the donor cell source.^{63,64} For this reason, cfDNA has been used in recent years as a promising biomarker for transplant rejection, infection surveillance, graft versus host disease, and even tumor recurrence.^{65–71}

In situations where a patient has received a recent blood transfusion or previous organ/stem cell transplant, MPSS-based NIPS should be the only screening method utilized. Since additional donor DNA would be marked in the SNP-based method, it limits the accurate evaluation of fetal chromosome status. MPSS-based NIPS assumes the donor DNA to be balanced. Donor DNA,

maternal DNA, and placental DNA will all be analyzed to determine whether an underlying imbalance is present for detecting aneuploidy and other copy number variants. Fetal sex discrepancy between NIPS and ultrasound can occur if the organ donor is male, due to the presence of donor Y chromosome in the cfDNA.^{64,72,73} For blood transfusion recipients, unlike for organ transplantation recipients, fetal sex chromosome discrepancy is only a concern if the transfusion occurred <4 weeks prior to the NIPS blood draw.⁷⁴

Maternal Weight and Fetal Fraction

Placental (“fetal”) cell free DNA enters maternal circulation due to blood exchange between maternal circulation and placenta. This cfDNA is quickly cleared from maternal circulation a few hours after delivery.⁷⁵ cfDNA is detectable in maternal serum at 7 weeks GA.⁴³ Most NIPS can be performed as early as 9 weeks GA, but sufficient cfDNA is necessary to provide a clinically significant result. The minimum fetal fraction (FF) varies by laboratory but is generally between 3% and 4%. FF is the percentage of cfDNA of fetal or placental origin compared to maternal cfDNA.⁷⁶ It increases at a slow and non-constant rate throughout pregnancy. Between 10 and 20 weeks gestational age, the FF ranges from 10% to 15%.^{76,77} Low FF can be caused by high maternal BMI, certain aneuploidy, chronic hypertension, certain maternal conditions, medications, and assisted reproductive technology.^{76,78}

Low FF can cause a non-reportable or failed NIPS result.^{22,78,79} In theory, since maternal cfDNA is derived from adipocytes, if a woman has more adipose tissue, more of her cfDNA will be present in circulation compared to fetal cfDNA, or possibly adipocytes will turnover at an accelerated rate.^{22,77–81} According to Livergood et al, women with a BMI of 25–29.9, 30–34.5, 35–39.9, and >40 had a 2.31, 3.66, 7.52, and 8.55 fold higher risk of a non-reportable result on cfDNA screening, respectively.⁷⁸ In women with a high BMI, the median FF is lower and increases at a slower rate compared to women with a lower BMI.^{22,78,79} At 21 weeks’ gestation GA the no call rate is the same in most weight groups. However, at this GA, follow-up options may be more limited.⁷⁸ Failed NIPS results can cause increased maternal anxiety and delay timely pregnancy management. Repeating NIPS has been shown to produce a result in 56% of cases.^{22,76}

MPSS-based NIPS has a lower non-reportable threshold when it comes to fetal fraction, while SNP-based NIPS has a higher fail rate.⁷⁹ Therefore, MPSS NIPS is preferable in women with a higher BMI. Furthermore, ultrasound at 11–14 weeks and MSS can be performed to help assess for aneuploidy, septated cystic hygroma, structural fetal anomalies and overall obstetric risks.⁷⁹

Maternal Medication Use

Maternal medication use can have an impact on cfDNA screening, particularly by impacting the fetal fraction. Some medications such as anticoagulants have been shown to lower fetal fraction and increase the chance of non-reportable results.^{40,41,82–84} In certain situations, lowering the fetal fraction can lead to false negatives on cfDNA screening. It has been proposed that anticoagulants can lower fetal fraction by decreasing trophoblast apoptosis or by increasing maternal cfDNA.^{40,82}

When patients are taking these medications, it is advised that they get their blood drawn before taking the medication. Drawing blood immediately before the medication intake will allow for the lowest impact medications can have on fetal fraction. In some circumstances, patients may not be appropriate candidates for cfDNA screening due to medication use. It is not advised to skip medication dosage for cfDNA screening. These patients should be counselled, and diagnostic testing should be offered.

MPSS technologies are generally less sensitive to small reductions in fetal fraction.⁷⁹ If the patient has a failed cfDNA screening through SNP-based NIPS, switching to the MPSS-based NIPS can be considered.

Summary

NIPS has significantly transformed prenatal care, offering valuable insights into fetal health and enabling earlier identification of potential risks. By carefully considering individual patient factors and selecting the most appropriate NIPS strategy, clinicians can maximize the benefits of this technology while minimizing potential limitations. [Table 1](#) summarizes the abovementioned clinical scenarios and the recommended NIPS approach for each. It is also important to

Table 1 Comparison of MPSS and SNP-Based NIPS Technologies

Clinical Consideration	MPSS-Based Approach	SNP-Based Approach
Balanced translocation carrier	Genome-Wide screening recommended	
Twin Pregnancies		Only method to determine zygosity
Vanishing Twin Pregnancies	Able to determine aneuploidy risk but will not detect the possibility of vanishing twin	Will report on suspicion of vanishing twin but might not provide aneuploidy risk
Triploidy		Only method to detect triploidy
IVF pregnancies	Consider Genome-wide approach for broader screen	If maternal parentage confirmation is desired
Triplets	Only approach to evaluate aneuploidy risk	
Transfusion/Transplant recipient	Only approach to evaluate aneuploidy risk	
High BMI and low fetal fraction	Lower likelihood for non-reportable result	May be attempted
Medication use	Lower likelihood for non-reportable result	May be attempted

Note: This table summarizes the optimal use of MPSS vs SNP-based NIPS technologies across various clinical considerations, highlighting which technology is most effective in each clinical scenario.

note that not all laboratories performing MPSS-based NIPS will offer analysis in each scenario. It is crucial to speak with the laboratory prior to ordering to ensure proper analysis of the results for your patients.

Technologies Used for Single Gene NIPT

Application of NIPS to single gene conditions was initially reported in 2000, three years after the discovery of cfDNA in maternal circulation.^{85,86} Since then, numerous case studies have been published utilizing this technology to detect paternally inherited or de novo autosomal dominant conditions, such as achondroplasia.^{87,88} Analysis of autosomal recessive conditions is analytically more challenging due to the high background of the maternal pathogenic variant in the cfDNA. In 2002, to overcome this barrier, only the paternal pathogenic variant was assessed for exclusion in the cfDNA.⁸⁹ Despite single gene NIPT (sgNIPT) becoming technologically available around the same time as aneuploidy NIPS, it had not become commercially available until 2018 and 2019 for autosomal dominant and recessive conditions, respectively. The slower adaptation of this testing was likely due to a combination of low commercial interest, high cost, insufficient volume of samples for validation, and low prevalence of individual conditions.^{90–92}

Autosomal dominant conditions targeted for cfDNA analysis (AD sgNIPT) typically include severe gestational or neonatal phenotypes with high de novo rates. While sgNIPT for autosomal recessive conditions (AR sgNIPT) assess for inherited disorders. AD sgNIPT compares maternal and fetal DNA to find differences in genes of interest, while AR sgNIPT compares the quantities of pathogenic to wild type alleles in the relevant genes.

Multiple studies have referred to sgNIPT as non-invasive prenatal diagnosis (NIPD) because unlike aneuploidy, placental mosaicism is not a limiting factor.^{90–92} While the sensitivity and specificity are at times comparable to diagnostic testing, sgNIPT can still produce false results due to vanishing twin.⁹⁰ Furthermore, many monogenic conditions currently present on the available screening panels have variable penetrance and high clinical variability and thus phenotype cannot always be predicted from genotype. It is important to keep these factors in mind when interpreting results.

Autosomal Dominant Conditions

Currently, a commercially available panel for dominant single gene NIPT includes 25 conditions across 30 genes that have severe phenotypes and a collective incidence of 1 in 600. The conditions include Noonan spectrum disorders, skeletal disorders, craniosynostosis syndromes, Cornelia de Lange syndrome, Alagille syndrome, tuberous sclerosis,

epileptic encephalopathy, SYNGAP1 related intellectual disability, CHARGE syndrome, Sotos syndromes, and Rett syndrome.^{93,94}

Indications for this testing can include (1) advanced paternal age (>40 years old),⁹⁵ (2) paternal family history of the aforementioned conditions, (3) ultrasound anomalies such as cardiac defects, lymphatic anomalies (cystic hygroma, increased nuchal translucency, pleural effusion, polyhydramnios, fetal hydrops, hydrocephalus), skeletal abnormalities (skull, facial, long bone, and digit malformations), and/or growth restriction.^{93,94}

Single gene NIPT for autosomal dominant conditions compares the cfDNA to the maternal genomic DNA (gDNA). If a mutation is identified in the former and not the latter, the variant is assumed to originate from the fetal cfDNA and is either de novo or paternally inherited. Differentiating between mutations in the cfDNA and sequencing errors is a challenge with this technology. To overcome this, unique sequences are attached to each fragment of DNA. The sample is enriched and sequenced with next generation sequencing (NGS). Since errors can arise during this process, the fragments with the same unique sequences are compared and deduplicated, a call is made when two-thirds of the reads match. The results are then compared to the maternal gDNA (in the past a paternal DNA sample was required, but recent NIPS developments have negated the need for a paternal sample). Pathogenic or likely pathogenic variants identified in the cfDNA are confirmed by repeat testing with deeper sequencing. Since this testing technology is assessing for novel variants the sensitivity (>99%) and specificity (>99%) are high. According to the laboratory's 2018 validation study and 2022 clinical experience study, no false negatives nor false positives were reported; however, the cohorts were small, and no call rates were high.^{93,94,96}

It is important to note that sgNIPT is still considered screening and, hence, irreversible pregnancy decisions should not be determined on these results alone. The most common genes associated with the aforementioned conditions are on this panel, not all associated genes are included. Furthermore, only sequence variants are assessed, deletions, duplications, structural rearrangements, and deep intronic variants are not evaluated.⁹⁴ Lastly, this methodology cannot assess fetal risk if the pregnant patient has a pathogenic variant in any of the 30 genes, the fetus would be at a 50% risk of inheriting the mutation and diagnostic testing would be the only way to accurately assess this risk.^{93,94}

Autosomal Recessive Conditions

Screening for autosomal recessive and X-linked recessive conditions is recommended by ACOG and ACMG prior to pregnancy; however, most screening does not occur until pregnancy begins and less than half of partners complete carrier screening.^{97–99} These barriers can result in uptake of diagnostic testing that a patient might have otherwise declined, limit the time for reproductive decision-making, and increase maternal anxiety. Currently, ACOG recommends screening for hemoglobinopathies, cystic fibrosis, and spinal muscular atrophy in all pregnant patients.¹⁰⁰ They recommend additional screening in the presence of a positive family history or specific ethnic background.¹⁰¹ ACMG recommends screening for 113 conditions that have a worldwide prevalence of $\geq 1/200$.¹⁰² Generally, the carrier screening turnaround time is 3–4 weeks and diagnostic testing results are reported in 2–3 weeks.

Single gene NIPT for autosomal recessive conditions can overcome some of the barriers posed by the traditional testing workflow. Currently, this testing is available for cystic fibrosis (*CFTR*), spinal muscular atrophy (*SMN1*), and hemoglobinopathies (*HBA1*, *HBA2*, and *HBB*).¹⁰³ The list of screened conditions using this platform is likely to expand in the future. If the pregnant patient is found to be a carrier for the aforementioned conditions, the testing is reflexed to the fetal cfDNA without the need for an additional blood sample. A paternal sample is not required to produce a result. The goal of sgNIPT for AR conditions is to evaluate the chance that the fetus has two homozygous or compound heterozygous pathogenic variants in the conditions tested, and therefore, be affected.¹⁰⁴ There are a number of different possible test results. If the calculated risk is less than the a priori risk, then a low risk (<1/500) or decreased risk result is reported. If the calculated risk is higher than the a priori risk, then high risk (>1/4) or increased risk result is reported. Furthermore, the high risk category is split into four risk estimates, 1/4, 1/2, 2/3, and 9/10, that correspond to the PPV to assist in patient counseling.¹⁰³

Single gene NIPT for AR conditions is a powerful tool that is especially important in situations where the pregnant patient wants carrier screening but (1) she is late to care, (2) her partner is unavailable, uninsured, or unwilling to undergo testing, (3) if there is a time constraint for reproductive decision-making, (4) if paternity is undetermined, or (5) if the couple is determined to be at 25% risk of having an affected child, yet are reluctant to pursue diagnostic testing. The potential for this technology to serve as a

primary carrier screening modality raises compelling questions that deserve dedicated investigations. Single gene NIPT is not diagnostic and should not be used to make irreversible pregnancy decisions.

Fetal Antigen Typing

RhD positive or negative status refers to the presence or absence of the RhD antigen on the surface of red blood cells, respectively.¹⁰⁵ RhD negative individuals are homozygous for variants on the *RHD* gene, compound heterozygous for one variant and one deletion, or most commonly, homozygous for deletions of the *RHD* gene. These individuals are at risk of creating antibodies against the RhD antigen (alloimmunization) after exposure events. During pregnancy, sensitization events can include vaginal bleeding, miscarriage, trauma, placental abruption, diagnostic testing (amniocentesis or chorionic villus sampling), and labor. Non-pregnancy events can include situations where RhD positive blood is introduced into circulation, such as blood transfusions.¹⁰⁵ Alloimmunization can result in maternal antibodies crossing the placenta and destroying fetal red blood cells, also known as, hemolytic disease of the fetus and newborn (HDFN). To prevent HDFN, the FDA approved use of prophylactic Rho(D) immune globulin (RhIg) in RhD negative non-alloimmunized women in the late 1960's. In the United States, RhIg has been given to all RhD negative women since then, and RhD associated HDFN has decreased from 16% to 1%.¹⁰⁶ The presence of other red blood cell (RBC) antigens or minor antigens can also cause HDFN, although they are much less common. Antibodies towards non-RhD antigens are identified in 1.5–2.5% of pregnant women.¹⁰⁵ RhIG is not applicable for these pregnancies.

If the patient is RhD negative or is identified to have antibodies against any erythrocyte antigen associated with HDFN, the traditional next step involves testing the partner for antigen status.¹⁰⁵ If negative, then the fetus is presumed to not be at risk. If positive or if reproductive partner is unavailable for testing, the pregnancy may need additional surveillance and monitoring. Maternal antibody titers and Doppler measurements of peak systolic velocity (PSV) in the fetal middle cerebral artery (MCA) can be used to monitor the pregnancy. If necessary, the benefits and risks of intrauterine blood transfusion and early delivery should be weighed.¹⁰⁵

Beginning in March 2024, in the United States, there was a nationwide shortage of RhIg, which prompted the integration of fetal RhD testing to prioritize RhIg for RhD negative women with RhD positive fetuses.¹⁰⁷ Non-invasive fetal RhD testing has been the standard of care throughout many countries in Europe for quite some time.^{108–113} One likely reason that this practice has not been adopted in the United States is the high rate of inconclusive or false results in the presence of non-deletion *RHD* variants.^{106,114} Qualitative PCR technology (that is used in European countries) cannot determine if the maternal sequence variant is present or absent in the fetal cfDNA; thus, the fetal antigen profile could not be predicted, causing inconclusive or false results.¹⁰⁶ Non-deletion *RHD* variants are more common in non-European ancestries.

Recently, two tests have been validated in the United States to assess fetal antigens with high sensitivity, specificity, and low inconclusive rate. In 2020, one lab validated their methodology for detection of fetal RhD, C, c, E, Kell, and Fya.¹⁰⁶ They were able to achieve 100% sensitivity (95% CI 99–100%) and 100% specificity (95% CI 99–100%) because they developed a method to accurately quantify sequence variants, which allowed them to predict whether the fetus inherited the maternal variant. In 2024, a different laboratory used SNP-based NIPS to successfully detect the fetal *RHD* genotype, with 100% sensitivity (95% CI 98.9–100%) and 99.3% specificity (95% CI 97.6–99.8%).¹¹⁵

Due to high sensitivity and specificity of fetal RBC antigen NIPT, it is reasonable to use this methodology to evaluate the risk of HDFN when a patient declines diagnostic testing. NIPT can be informative about fetal status when (1) the patient is RhD negative, (2) the patient developed antibodies towards other RBC antigens known to be associated with HDFN, (3) the father is unavailable/unwilling to test or paternity is unknown, and/or (4) the father tests positive for the antigen in question. As of March 2024, ACOG supports the use of NIPT to detect fetal RhD status in the context of an RhIg shortage, but has not taken a stance on this testing for minor antigens.¹¹⁶

Ethical Considerations

Widespread use of NIPS in pregnancies to screen for chromosomal abnormalities in fetuses raises ethical questions related to genetic privacy, reproductive decision-making, and the potential for unintended consequences. Globally, the birth rate of individuals with Down syndrome has drastically decreased since the mid-2010s and has been attributed to

cfDNA screening. As cfDNA testing and screening aims to detect more and more conditions, the question of unintended consequences should remain at the forefront.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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