Arizona earns top marks for newborn screening

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PHOENIX -- Arizona is being held up as a national model for newborn blood screening, but getting there took some work.

Every newborn in Arizona gets a blood test for certain metabolic disorders, and after one report said Arizona could do better, the state Department of Health Services proved it was up to the challenge.

"In Arizona, we test for 28 metabolic disorders," Celia Nabor with the Arizona Department of Health Services told 3TV.

And that means a blood sample is taken from every newborn in the state in what is commonly known as the heel prick test. A tiny prick on the bottom of the foot allows doctors to collect a small bit of blood, and that sample is then sent to the state lab on blood spot cards.

"By law, the Arizona state laboratory here in Phoenix is designated as the only facility to handle and test these types of newborn screening blood spots," Nabor said.

And it is important those tests are done quickly. Many of the things tested for are tied to nutrition and can have lasting effects if not caught early.

"That is what makes it important that we quickly get it tested before the baby goes home and becomes what we refer to as well fed," Nabor said. "Because they could potentially be eating foods or formula that could be making them sick."

Sick or worse.

"A late diagnosis could potentially result in very negative outcomes to potentially include a baby dying," Nabor said.

But after a report last year said Arizona could do better in getting those results faster, Department of Health Services Director Will Humble set an
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ambitious goal.

“All initial blood spots for all babies born in Arizona would arrive here to the state laboratory within three days of collection,” said Nabor, who headed up the transit time project, which she says includes a new courier to get the blood here along with expanded hours.

“We have also opened up the state laboratory here on Saturdays. It is staffed six days a week now,” she said.

And once here, the thousands of cards that are collected each month are quickly processed by lab technicians, said Victor Waddell, bureau chief at the lab.

“And take 1/8 of an inch spot of blood from one of those blood spots on the card, then they will use that to run a battery of tests we run here,” Waddell said.

They are steps that are now earning our state national recognition for both faster transit and testing time and for providing more information.

“The goal of the project was to be completely transparent to everybody,” Nabor explained.

It's all to keep Arizona babies happy and healthy in spite of that little poke on the heel to take the blood.

Those blood spot cards are not stored indefinitely. After the information is gathered and the test completed, the spot cards are destroyed. The information is stored in a digital database in case doctors need it later.

The Department of Health Services does coordinate follow-up care if needed. The department says it discovers about 200 potential problems for babies every year.

For more information, visit www.aznewborn.com.