

Frequently Asked Questions About Winter-over Pregnancy Screening

The U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) continues to enhance the medical screening guidelines of the Physical Qualifying (PQ) process. The austere environment and limited medical capabilities and transport options make it essential that healthy, fit participants are working in Antarctica.

1. Why test for pregnancy?

Because clinics at U.S. stations are not equipped or staffed to provide adequate prenatal care, manage obstetric emergencies, or perform abortions, medical evacuation may be necessary. There are few transportation options during the isolated Antarctic winter. Consequently, pregnancy puts not only the mother and unborn child at risk but also the flight crews and other station personnel.

2. Why is there a change now?

In May 2010, the USAP Federal Medical Review Panel (comprised of physicians from the USAP, NASA, Federal Occupational Health Administration, the Air Force, and independent subject matter experts) recommended that tests for pregnancy, which is a “Not Physically Qualified” condition for Antarctic deployment, be administered 1 to 2 weeks before station closing to women of child-bearing age. NSF accepted the Panel’s recommendation and developed the new policy.

3. Will every female be tested? Do age, fertility, sexual preference, etc. matter?

All wintering females of child-bearing age will be screened. Medical staff will compile the list using PQ packet information and administer the testing at station clinics.

4. Can I refuse to be tested?

Yes, but you would be deemed NPQ’d and would not be eligible to winter-over.

5. Can I ask to be re-tested or submit a waiver?

The NSF has determined there is no waiver process for pregnancy.

6. If I am found to be pregnant would I be sent off the ice?

Yes. As always, pregnancy results in NPQ. **Contract employees** would be considered contract complete, compensated for the work that has been done, and put on the first available flight. **Grantees and employees of Federal agencies** should consult their home institutions or employers.

7. What happens to my medical insurance?

For contract employees, Just as in other situations, if you elected insurance, you could continue medical coverage with COBRA. **Grantees and employees of Federal agencies** should consult their home institutions or employer

8. What if I get pregnant after the testing?

We’ll do our best to manage the situation. Our clinics have limited capabilities and pregnancy poses a risk to the mother and unborn child. This risk also impacts all station personnel and flight crew. There are circumstances where a medevac is not possible no matter how dire the need.

9. How would my privacy be protected?

Just as the USAP protects other Personally Identifiable Information, we do not reveal medical conditions.

10. How many pregnancies have there been?

Due to privacy issues we cannot give specifics, but the number is very small and some are unknown. Still, we must do all we can to ensure the safety of everyone.



Pregnancy Screening

The PQ process now includes pregnancy screening for all USAP wintering females of child-bearing age.

Before Last Transport

Beginning with the austral winter 2011 season the U.S. Antarctic Program (USAP) will conduct pregnancy screening at the station clinics. Close to three weeks before the last transportation of the summer all female participants of child bearing age will be tested.

The medical staff at USAP clinics will compile the list and manage the testing process at the stations. More information is available at www.USAP.gov under Travel and Deployment Updates and from your hiring manager, HR and medical staff.

Clinic Limits

We are nearing the isolated winter season when there is no routine transport to or from USAP research stations.

The USAP medical clinics are only staffed and equipped to provide limited urgent or emergent care primarily on an outpatient basis. They do not have the capability to perform surgery, anesthesia, or invasive monitoring as seen in critical care facilities nor can they provide routine or emergent obstetrical services.

Screening Enhancements

The medical guidelines were developed to ensure the deployment of a healthy and fit workforce to Antarctica. In recent years mandatory flu vaccines and gall bladder testing have been added to the PQ process. The austere environment and limited medical capabilities and transport options make rigorous screening essential. The goal is to reduce risks for individuals and for the entire program.

