Echogenic Intracardiac Foci

This literally means “bright spot in the heart”. This is a tiny speck of calcification or mineralization in one of the papillary muscles which helps open one of the valves of the heart. Think of it as a grain of sand. Like choroid cysts, we don’t know why some fetuses show it and others don’t. Several things to know about echogenic intracardiac foci.

a) They have nothing to do with heart development or function.
b) They don’t actually resolve, but they look like they do as the heart gets bigger and bigger and the little speck of calcification stays the same.
c) They are most commonly considered a ‘normal variant’, seen in 3-4% of all fetuses during the 2nd trimester.
d) Their only potential significance is an association with certain chromosome abnormalities. The strongest association is with something called ‘trisomy 13’ but fetuses with trisomy 13 invariably have lots of other abnormalities that can also be seen with ultrasound. Like trisomy 18, affected fetuses with trisomy 13 don’t live. Echogenic intracardiac foci also slightly increase the risk for fetal Down syndrome, with emphasis on “slight”. For patients who are at low risk for fetal Down syndrome before they walk in the door, they remain at low risk. Therefore, they are of potential significance only patients who are already at high risk or occasionally for patients who are considered at borderline risk.
e) As with choroid cysts, echogenic intracardiac foci are simply a reminder to take a good look at the fetus, which is what we always do anyway. We do not offer or suggest genetic amniocentesis for echogenic intracardiac foci alone, but correlate this minor finding with other information and risk factors. Like choroid cysts, there is no reason to follow these findings with subsequent ultrasounds.

If you have further questions, we have 3 genetic counselors available to discuss your potential risks and to review other screening information.

Further information is available at www.fetalscreening.com and at www.fetalandwomens.com