

MATERNAL-FETAL MEDICINE TODAY

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► Subspecialized Expertise for High-Risk Pregnancies

As a subspecialty of obstetrics and gynecology, maternal-fetal medicine (MFM) has become even more sophisticated in recent years to address areas of prevalent need. Virtua's Maternal Risk Program illustrates such services and areas of ready care for women whose pregnancy requires additional vigilance or intervention for important areas of known risk. Focus on such common concerns among high-risk pregnancies as cardiac conditions, gestational diabetes, pre-eclampsia, substance abuse, and placenta accreta define this program, which is unique to South Jersey.

"With physicians on our team who each have special interest, training, and experience in these conditions, we can get patients evaluated and under management in a knowledgeable way quickly—or with prompt recommendations routed back to their referring obstetrician—using the most current approaches to safeguarding mother and child who may be at risk," said Virtua maternal-fetal medicine specialist Shailen Shah, MD, lead physician for the Virtua MFM program.

Managing High Risk Factors

With three hospitals that have well-established maternity services and a growing obstetrical practice footprint, Virtua has allocated more resources to patients experiencing difficult or dangerous pregnancies.

- MFM specialists and women's heart experts work together in a well-established **cardiac pregnancy program** to care for individuals who are pregnant or considering pregnancy and have heart disease. Heart conditions are increasingly recognized in younger women, who often are not aware of them, and are a major basis of maternal morbidity. With high-level cardiac capabilities at Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, the program can address all needs. "Pregnancy is a kind of cardiac stress test," said Dr. Shah, "and women who have a preexisting cardiovascular or related condition should receive specialized care, ideally before they become pregnant, as well as during and after."

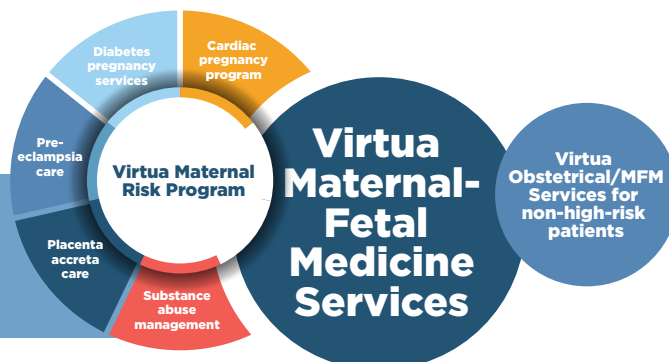
For maternal-fetal medicine appointments, call 856-246-3525 (Camden), 609-914-7914 (Mount Holly), 856-247-3328 (Voorhees), or 856-341-8300 (Washington Township).

- **Pre-eclampsia** requires careful monitoring, management of drugs and medication side effects, and timing of delivery for patients based on clinical features.
- **Diabetes**—gestational, type 1, and type 2—can significantly affect development of the unborn and health of the mother. With diagnosis of the condition growing, Virtua has dedicated expertise that can help the patient and referring OB/GYN to control the disease during pregnancy.
- Virtua is one of the few programs in the area providing medication substitution therapy (typically with Subutex) for pregnant women with opioid dependency. For any form of **substance abuse**, the team considers all aspects of care to ensure the health of the mother and baby in a nonjudgmental environment.
- Ultrasound evaluation for any pregnant patient who had a previous caesarean delivery to look for **placenta accreta**, a condition that can cause uterine tearing and severe blood loss after birth. A multidisciplinary team may be assembled for various surgical options at delivery.

A Resource to Safeguard Pregnancies

Nurse coordination aids care of these patients as well as those whose pregnancy risk stems from age, multiple fetuses, other chronic health conditions (e.g., hypertension and renal compromise), previous pregnancy complications, genetic conditions, or weight problems. The perinatologists also offer complete care for non-high-risk patients, including testing and screening. They collaborate with midwives and doulas, and Virtua hospitals have been recognized for achieving low rates of C-sections, episiotomy, and early elective deliveries.

"We'd like the OB and PCP community to think of getting us involved early to evaluate the scope of risk and any assistance needed in managing it," said Dr. Shah.



Rigorous Steps to Erase Disparities in Maternal Care

Data and other evidence have broadly documented the stark reality of race-based inequities and bias in care in the U.S. health care system and served to promote long-overdue corrections. Nowhere are such race-based disparities as glaring as in maternal-fetal health, where the U.S. is among the worst performers in its cohort nations. In New Jersey, Black non-Hispanic women experience a pregnancy-related maternal mortality ratio nearly seven times that of their white non-Hispanic counterparts.

“We’ve undertaken a rigorous internal analysis to detect any gaps or shortcomings in Virtua’s obstetrical care that may correlate with the race of patients,” said obstetrician Theresa Adeliyi, MD, director of Virtua’s Center for Women.

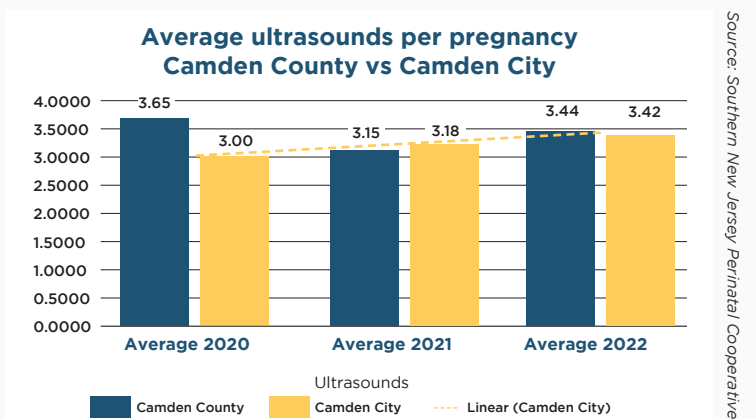
The rate of low-birth-weight infants and preterm birth is higher—and MFM consultations and prenatal ultrasounds lower—in the City of Camden than the rest of Camden County. Virtua has worked diligently and successfully (see figure) since 2020 to increase ultrasounds for pregnant women in this community, delivering them through MFM services at Virtua’s campus in Camden and in cooperation with the Osborn Family Health Center at Virtua Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, while also providing needed high-risk visits.

Finding disproportionate hypertension in expectant Black women in its served OB population (consistent with national data), Virtua also detected a lower rate of treatment for the condition in Black and Hispanic patients. As a result, Virtua has standardized its care protocol, including a set timeline for treatment of acute, severe hypertensive events.

Also consistent with nationwide data, a review of Virtua’s patients revealed an increasingly disproportionate number of Hispanic women impacted by diabetes in pregnancy. Virtua’s robust and growing MFM diabetes program now addresses this finding in order to reverse it.

Finally, Virtua’s diligence revealed higher rates of C-sections in its Black and Asian OB populations (including patients of Middle Eastern and Arab descent). The service has now introduced provider education and cultural awareness activities that include physicians in its new residency program, as well as additional forceps training, and an established clinical pathway for C-sections that requires two-physician concurrence that includes the Virtua laborist.

Increased emphasis on informed consent and patient participation in decision making, particularly in labor and delivery, is supported by the service’s new Team Birth program. The Quality Improvement Program — New Jersey (QIP-NJ) selected Virtua Voorhees Hospital and Virtua Marlton Hospital to participate in this program, in which the team consults closely with patients and their support persons during staff shift transitions in the birthing suite to ensure understanding and confirmation of ongoing plan and personnel, and to empower patients as full participants.



Since Virtua opened its maternal-fetal medicine practice in Camden on Nov. 1, 2020, the number of ultrasounds provided to pregnant women living in the city has steadily increased. As of 2022, they were on par with the county average.