

SPINA BIFIDA



FACT SHEET

Spina Bifida (myelomeningocele) is derived from the Latin words *Spina*, meaning spine and, *Bifida*, meaning split or divided. The spine is made up of bones called vertebrae which normally cover and protect the spinal cord. In Spina Bifida, some of these vertebrae are not completely formed but are split or divided and the defective spinal cord and its coverings usually protrude through the opening. The sac-like bulge (lesion) may be present at any level on the back from the neck to the buttocks; however, the majority of lesions appear in the lower back. For most women, a diet rich in vitamin folate (Folic Acid) before and early in pregnancy, will help prevent spina bifida in their babies.

There are 3 major effects of Spina Bifida:

Paralysis and Loss of Sensation

Since the spinal cord which protrudes is defective, the nerves are disorganised and damaged. As a result, messages from the brain to the muscles (causing movement) and those from the body to the brain (giving sensations of touch, pain and position) are impaired. However, paralysis, muscle weakness and loss of sensation occur only at the level of the lesion (Sac-like bulge) and downward. In most cases the head, upper trunk and arms of the person are not affected.

Lack of Bladder and Bowel Control (Incontinence)

The nerves which control the bladder and bowel are located in the lowest region of the spinal cord and thus incontinence is a major problem for

children with spina bifida. Lack of bladder control presents two immediate dangers: infection and back pressure on the kidneys.

Hydrocephalus

In about 80 to 90 percent of births of children with spina bifida an associated problem known as "Hydrocephalus" occurs. Hydrocephalus is a build up of the natural drainage of this fluid. With modern methods of treatment this does not often result in any intellectual disability.

After a baby is born with spina bifida, an operation is performed to close the lesion as soon as possible. If the child has hydrocephalus, a shunt which contains a valve, is inserted into the ventricle in the brain. If fluid builds up, the valve allows the fluid to drain away. As the child grows, this shunt or tube must be lengthened. If a blockage in this tube occurs, the child may get severe headaches and fevers. If such symptoms occur medical attention must be sought as soon as possible.

Children who have spina bifida usually receive physiotherapy and some may require orthopaedic surgery. The physiotherapy aims to increase muscle strength to enable children to walk and engage in other activities. Bowel incontinence can usually be controlled by diet, medication and training. Caregivers may need to learn how to best assist with regular toileting. If you are concerned please talk to the parents.

Children with spina bifida usually attend regular schools and may need physical assistance if they use a wheelchair or other aids. Children who have spina bifida do not usually have problems with communication.

For further information and advice, contact CHILD Australia.

5 Carson Road, Malaga WA 6090

Telephone: 08 9249 4333 ☎ Facsimile: 08 9249 4366

Email: admin@childaustralia.org.au ☎ Website: <http://www.childaustralia.org.au>