

FACTSHEET: SPINA BIFIDA

What is Spina Bifida?

Spina Bifida is characterized by the incomplete development of the brain, spinal cord, and/or meninges (the protective covering around the brain and spinal cord). It is the most common neural tube defect in the United States- affecting 1,500 to 2,000 of the more than 4 million babies born in the County each year.

Causes

No one knows what disrupts complete closure of the neural tube, causing a malformation to develop. Scientists suspect genetic, nutritional, and environmental factors play a role. Research studies indicate that insufficient intake of folic acid- a common B vitamin- in the mother's diet is a key factor in causing spina bifida and other neural tube defects.

Diagnosis

It is diagnosed prenatally, or before birth. However, some mild cases may go unnoticed until after birth, or postnatally. Very mild cases may never be detected.

Signs and Symptoms

The sign and symptoms vary from person to person depending on the type. Closed neural tube defects are often recognized early due to an abnormal tuft or clump of hair or a small dimple or birthmark on the skin at the site of the spinal malformation.

Types of Spina Bifida

Occulta is the mildest and most common form in which one or more vertebrae are malformed. The opening in the spine is covered by a layer of skin. This form of spina rarely causes disability or symptoms.

Closed neural tube defects consist of a group of a diverse group of spinal defects in which of fat, bone, or membranes. In some children, there are no symptoms; in others the malformation causes incomplete paralysis with urinary and bowel dysfunction.

Meningocele – the meninges protrude from the spinal opening, and the malformation may or may not be covered by a layer of skin. Some children with meningocele may have few or no symptoms while others may experience symptoms like closed neural tube defects.

Myelomeningocele is the most severe and occurs when the spinal cord is exposed through the opening in the spine, resulting in partial or complete paralysis of the parts of the body below the spinal opening. The paralysis may be so severe that the affected individual is unable to walk and may have urinary and bowel dysfunction.

Reference

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Public Health Service