Spina Bifida & Hydrocephalus Association of Ontario

Spina Bifida Fast Facts

Q: What is spina bifida?

A: Spina bifida is a neural tube defect (NTD) that occurs within the first four weeks of pregnancy, resulting in varying degrees of permanent damage to the spinal cord and nervous system. Infants born with spina bifida may have an open lesion on their spine where significant damage to the nerves and spinal cord occurs. Although the opening is surgically repaired shortly after birth, the nerve damage is permanent, resulting in varying degrees of paralysis of the lower limbs, depending largely on the location and severity of the lesion. Even with no visible lesion, there may be improperly formed or missing vertebrae and accompanying nerve damage.

Q: Are there different types of spina bifida?

A: Yes. The three most common types are: myelomeningocele, the most severe form in which the spinal cord and its protective covering, the meninges, protrude from the opening in the spine; meningocele, where the spinal cord develops normally and only the meninges protrudes and may be exposed from the opening created by damaged or missing vertebrae; and occulta, which means "hidden," the mildest form where the location where one or more vertebrae are malformed is covered by a layer of skin.

Q: What causes spina bifida?

A: There is no known cause of spina bifida. Researchers are studying the effects of heredity, nutrition, environment and pollution, which could lead to physical damage to the fetus.

Q: How is spina bifida treated?

A: Treatment involves surgery and therapy to minimize further neurological damage and address the resulting conditions. Treatment can also include medication, physiotherapy and the use of assistive devices. Many people with spina bifida need mobility supports such as braces, crutches or wheelchairs. Almost all will have some form of bladder or bowel dysfunction, conditions they must learn to control and manage

Q: Can spina bifida be cured?

A: There is no cure. Ongoing therapy, medical care and/or surgical treatments are necessary to help prevent and manage complications and secondary conditions throughout an individual's life. Just 50 years ago, only 10% of babies born with spina bifida survived their first year. Today, with research and advances in medical technology, 90% survive and thrive.

Q: Can spina bifida be prevented?

A: Taking a minimum of 0.4 milligrams of folic acid three months before conception and during the first trimester can reduce the risk of having a baby born with an NTD by as much as 70%.

For more information, visit www.folicacid.ca.