



What is Spina Bifida?

Spina bifida is the incomplete formation of the spine and spinal cord. It occurs before birth during the first month of a baby's development in the womb.

People with spina bifida have varying degrees of permanent disability including paralysis or weakness in the legs, bowel and bladder incontinence, hydrocephalus and specific learning difficulties.

How does spina bifida occur?

The central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord) develops from an embryonic structure known as the 'neural tube' within the first month of pregnancy.

The neural tube begins as a flat layer of cells which folds over and 'zips up' to form a tube. Spina bifida occurs if the tube fails to close completely at some point along the baby's back (at the lower end usually). When the neural tube fails to 'zip up', bone muscle and skin cannot form around the spinal cord where the tube is open and so the spinal cord is left exposed and may protrude through the open part of the spine. *(For more information on Neural Tube Defects see Fact Sheet 9)*

Symptoms associated with spina bifida vary depending on the position of the opening along the spine and on how much of the spinal cord, or the protective sac ('meninges') protrudes through the opening.

What causes Spina Bifida?

The specific causes of spina bifida are not known, however it is thought that a complex combination of both genetic and environmental factors play a role.

How common is Spina Bifida?

In Victoria 30-35 babies are identified annually with spina bifida and of those between 7 and 15 survive after birth. Approximately 5000 people in Australia have spina bifida with approximately 2000 of those living in Victoria.

Facts about Spina Bifida

- The term spina bifida is derived from the Latin words 'spina' meaning spine and 'bifida' meaning split or divided
- Spina bifida affects more than 10 million people worldwide
- The effects of spina bifida are life-long and extremely variable
- More people have spina bifida than Cystic Fibrosis and Muscular Dystrophy combined
- Spina bifida is the most frequently occurring permanently disabling birth defect
- 85-90% of people with spina bifida also have hydrocephalus ('fluid on the brain')
- There is NO cure

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