

Effects of Spina Bifida



An Overview of the effects of Spina Bifida

The effects of Spina Bifida vary enormously, depending on the type, the location of the cyst and the severity of the condition. These include Hydrocephalus, varying degrees of paralysis, pressure sores, loss of sensation of the lower limbs, malformations, latex allergies, social and sexual issues and bowel and bladder incontinence.

Latex Allergy

A small minority of people with Spina Bifida are allergic to latex. This is an allergy to products made from natural rubber latex. Products made from natural rubber latex usually contain a number of chemicals and some people are allergic to the chemicals rather than the latex itself.

Sex and Reproduction

The male and female reproductive organs develop normally in the person with Spina Bifida. Nerve damage may, in some cases, affect the function of the reproductive organs. The desire to have sexual intercourse or a sexual relationship can be as strong in someone with Spina Bifida as anyone else. Many people with Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus live happily with a partner enjoying a satisfying sexual relationship, and have families of their own. It is advisable to take the higher dose (5mg) of folic acid prior to conception. Urinary and bowel incontinence can be an issue, but they do not make sexual relations impossible.

Pressure Sores

A pressure sore is a sore on an area of skin where there is continuous heavy pressure, leading to a reduced flow of blood to the area causing tissue to erode and die. People with Spina Bifida, especially wheelchair users are prone to developing pressure sores because of insensitive skin or paralysis.

Paralysis and loss of sensation

In the case of myelomeningocele the spinal cord protrudes from the spine throughout pregnancy and is closed by surgery shortly after birth. As a result the spinal cord is almost invariably damaged and defective, the nerves being disorganised and broken. As a result messages from the brain (controlling and initiating movement) and those from the body to the brain (giving the sensations of touch, pain and position) are impaired. However, paralysis, muscle weakness and loss of sensation occur only at the level of the lesion and downward. Due to lack of skin sensation and decreased mobility, skin tissue breakdown may occur resulting in pressure sores. In most cases the head, upper trunk and arms are not affected. The level of impairment varies considerably depending on the amount of damage and the location of the lesion.

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Lack of bladder and bowel control (Incontinence)

The nerves that control the bladder and bowel are located in the lowest region of the spinal cord. Consequently incontinence is a major problem particularly in the case of myelomeningocele. Lack of bladder control presents two immediate dangers - infection and back pressure on the kidneys which, without proper management, can lead to renal problems.

Hydrocephalus

Hydrocephalus literally means 'water on the brain' and is a potentially dangerous condition involving the excessive accumulation of spinal fluid within the brain caused either by over production of the fluid or more usually by an obstruction to its normal circulation. While it is a complication of Spina Bifida occurring in approximately 90 % of cases, Hydrocephalus is by no means exclusive to Spina Bifida.

More in-depth information is available on each topic. Please visit www.sbhi.ie for more information.