

Congenital Heart Disease Awareness

Tips to Help Keep Your Health On Track!

Congenital Heart Disease is the most common type of birth defect, affecting nearly 40,000 infants born in the United States each year. A congenital heart defect may be discovered before birth, at birth, or after the baby is born and has already left the hospital. The important thing to understand is that the advancement of medical care and treatment over the years for this type of heart disease means that infants are living longer, healthier lives. Today, approximately one million adults in the United States are living with some form of a congenital heart defect.⁽¹⁾

What is a congenital heart defect?

A congenital heart defect affects the structure of the baby's heart and the way it functions. These defects can vary from being less serious (such as a small hole between the chambers of the heart) to very severe (such as missing or poorly formed sections of the heart). If the baby's doctor suspects that a congenital heart defect is present, even while the mother is pregnant, they will usually perform several tests to ensure that the baby is healthy.⁽¹⁾

What are some of the symptoms of congenital heart defects in infants?

While many babies may go home from the hospital without being diagnosed with a congenital heart defect, if a parent observes any of the following symptoms, they should contact their baby's pediatrician:⁽¹⁾

- Tires easily or falls asleep during feedings
- Head sweating, especially during feedings
- Fast breathing when at rest or when sleeping
- Not playful or curious; sleeps a lot
- Pale or bluish skin color
- Poor weight gain
- Puffy face, hands, and/or feet
- Often irritable; difficult to console

What are some of the symptoms of congenital heart defects in children?

Many times, a child may have a congenital heart defect and it will not be detected until later on in their childhood. If your child has two or more of these symptoms, contact your pediatrician:⁽¹⁾

- Seems to run out of breath during play
- Difficulty keeping up with playmates
- Tires easily in general and sleeps a lot
- Change in color during active play/sports
- Pale or bluish tint around lips and nose
- Frequent colds and respiratory illnesses
- Slow growth and weight gain/poor appetite
- Complains of chest pain/heart pounding

What are some of the risk factors associated with congenital heart defects?

While the cause of most congenital heart defects is unknown, some are due to changes in the baby's genes or chromosomes. Others may be due to a combination of genes and other risk factors. Risk factors that may increase the chances of having a baby born with a congenital heart defect are:⁽¹⁾

- Mothers who are obese
- Mothers with diabetes
- Mothers who smoke
- Family history of a congenital heart defect
- Mothers who consume alcohol during pregnancy
- Mothers who use drugs prior to/during pregnancy
- Mothers taking certain medications
- Mothers who do not eat a healthy diet

What type of screening can be done if a congenital heart defect is suspected?

If a pediatric cardiologist suspects that your baby or child has a congenital heart defect, they may perform a test called a Pulse Oximetry Screening. This bedside test, which is painless and takes only a couple of minutes to perform, can usually identify if a congenital heart defect is present. The test is performed using a machine called a pulse oximeter. It measures the pulse rate as well as the amount of oxygen in the blood since low levels of oxygen can be a sign of a congenital heart defect.⁽¹⁾

When to contact your doctor?

If you suspect your baby or child may have a congenital heart defect, contact your pediatrician immediately. Early detection of congenital heart disease is very important for ensuring that babies and children with a congenital heart defect receive specialized care and treatment which may help them to live longer, healthier lives.

⁽¹⁾ www.cdc.gov