

Spina Bifida cases a major public health challenge in Maharashtra and India



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Mumbai, India - Spina bifida cases have become a major public health burden in Maharashtra and across India, with an alarming 4-5 cases reported per 1000 live births. The centre aims to provide critical medical intervention for infants or children diagnosed with spina bifida, offering hope for families who currently face the devastating reality of untreated cases. The Department of Paediatric Surgery along with the Spina Bifida Foundation, is organizing a free multidisciplinary counselling and program in Lilavati Hospital on Tuesday 30th January, 2024.

Patients will be evaluated free of cost and counselled regarding their further management and rehabilitation.

Spina Bifida is a congenital birth defect that happens when a baby is growing inside the mother. It happens when the spinal cord, brain, or their covering called meninges don't grow properly. It can happen anywhere along the spine and is usually seen as a hole in the baby's back when they are born. Sometimes, it can be a sac filled with fluid sticking out from the spine, which may or may not have the spinal cord inside. There are three types of spina bifida: Myelomeningocele is the most common and serious type, where a sac outside the baby's back has parts of the spinal cord and nerves.

This causes big physical problems like not being able to control the bladder and trouble moving or feeling their legs or feet. Meningocele also has a sac filled with fluid outside the baby's back, but it doesn't have any part of the spinal cord, so the problems are not as bad. Spina bifida occulta is a milder type that might not be noticed until later in life and doesn't cause any problems because the spinal cord and nerves are not damaged.

Dr. Santosh Karmarkar, a Pediatric Surgeon at Lilavati Hospital and Research Centre in Mumbai, pointed out that approximately 70% patients are not getting the required treatment due to lack of awareness or financial constraints preventing them from affording multiple surgeries during childhood. These patients also lack proper and timely guidance and medical care, forcing them to fend for themselves. Medical professionals are calling for proactive measures to address this issue and stress the importance of tackling the root causes of spina bifida. Additionally, he revealed the future plans to establish a state-of-the-art Fetal Surgery Centre in Mumbai dedicated to performing complex in-utero surgeries.

Dr. Santosh Karmarkar emphasized the crucial role of folic acid in reducing the risk of neural tube defects, like spina bifida, in unborn babies. He advised that women incorporate folic acid-rich foods into their diet prior to trying to conceive to ensure they have an adequate supply in their system. This nutrient is known to be vital for early fetal development and can greatly reduce the chances of birth defects. Furthermore, Dr. Karmakar advocated for the use of prenatal vitamins containing folic acid, which are often recommended by healthcare professionals. By taking these supplements, women can further mitigate the risk of neural tube defects in their future offspring.

It is important for women to be proactive about their health and nutrition even before pregnancy is planned. Ensuring sufficient levels of folic acid through a balanced diet and possibly supplements can lead to a healthier pregnancy and lower the likelihood of certain birth defects. Adds Dr Karmarkar.