Microcephaly Encyclopedia Article

Microcephaly

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Microcephaly

A birth defect characterized by an abnormally small head, a receding forehead, and large ears and nose. The condition often signals an abnormally small brain and the presence of other disorders such as **cerebral palsy.**

Microcephaly can be caused by genetic and chromosomal abnormalities, or by environmental factors such as prenatal radiation exposure, prenatal infections **(rubella,** toxoplasmosis), and maternal drug use. Women with **phenylketonuria (PKU)** who do not maintain a low-protein diet during pregnancy are also at risk for having babies with microcephaly.

Microcephaly is occasionally obvious at birth, particularly if the fontanelle, or soft spot, is closed. It is typically diagnosed by measuring the circumference of the baby's head. Sometimes this measurement can be taken in utero through ultrasound waves. The child's physical growth is usually retarded, and he or she suffers delays in speech and mental development. Some children have seizures, crossed eyes, and spastic paralysis.

The treatment for a microcephalic child is essentially therapeutic, depending on the attending disabilities. The parents may need to learn special feeding techniques if the child's swallowing techniques are underdeveloped. Physical therapy can improve the child's coordination and strengthen or relax the muscles. **Seizures** and involuntary movements can be prevented by drugs such as anticonvulsants and muscle relaxers. Wheelchairs and orthopedic devices can aid mobility. Speech therapy can help the child to overcome communication difficulties.

For Further Study

Organizations

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
Address: 1275 Mamaroneck Avenue
White Plains, NY 10605
Telephone: (914) 428-7100
FAX: (914) 997-4763

Center for Children with Chronic Illness and Disability
Address: Box 721 WMHC
420 Delaware SE
Minneapolis, MN 55455
Telephone: (612) 626-4032
FAX: (612) 626-2134

Association of Birth Defect Children
Address: 827 Irma Avenue

Orlando, FL 32803
Telephone: (407) 245-7035; toll-free (800) 313-2232