

Fact Sheet

Division of Child and Adolescent Health
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Microcephaly

What is microcephaly?

Microcephaly (MIKE-ro-SEF-a-LEE, also called microcephalus) is an abnormally small head. A baby's head size is measured by a doctor placing a tape measure around the head. This is called measuring the head circumference. When the baby's head circumference is less than the second percentile (smaller than the heads of 98% of babies at the same age), he or she has microcephaly. Microcephaly can mean that a child's brain is not developing normally. Sometimes the child's head is a normal size at birth but does not grow at a typical rate. It may begin to appear small over time. Microcephaly can also occur when the openings in a baby's skull (soft spots) close too early. This situation is called craniosynostosis.

What types of problems occur with microcephaly?

When microcephaly results from abnormal development of the brain, the child may have developmental delay, learning problems, or mental retardation. Other problems seen in some children with microcephaly include speech delay, seizures, and difficulty with motor skills. Life expectancy may be reduced.

How common is microcephaly?

Microcephaly occurs in about 4 to 6 of every 10,000 births each year in the United States. In Virginia, about 33 children are reported each year with microcephaly.

What causes microcephaly?

Many cases of microcephaly occur due to a combination of environmental and genetic factors. Environmental factors may include smoking or drinking alcohol during pregnancy. Microcephaly can occur as the only birth defect a child has. It can also occur in combination with other birth defects or as part of a syndrome (combination of findings). The way in which a syndrome is passed through the family is specific to the given syndrome. The chance for parents of one child with microcephaly to have another child with microcephaly may be increased. A genetic counselor or geneticist can help you determine the risks for your family and situation.

How is microcephaly treated?

There is no specific treatment for microcephaly, unless it is caused by craniosynostosis. The child's pediatrician will measure the head circumference regularly to track its growth.

Where can I go for more information about microcephaly?

March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation
www.modimes.org
1-888-MODIMES (1-888-663-4637)

Infant and Toddler Connection of Virginia (Early Intervention Services)
www.infantva.org
1-800-234-1448

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