

What Are Congenital Conditions?



Highlights

About 3 in 100 babies are born with a health condition.

Birth differences (congenital anomalies) are health conditions that a baby is born with.

Your baby's chances of a birth difference may increase due to factors such as exposure to harmful substances, infections during pregnancy, and age, especially after 35.

You can reduce the chances of birth differences by maintaining a healthy lifestyle, avoiding certain medicines, and taking folate supplements before conception.

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What are birth differences (congenital anomalies)?

Birth differences include any health condition that a baby is born with. They are sometimes referred to as congenital anomalies or birth defects.

Key points:

About 3 in 100 babies are born with a health condition.

Some babies may have more than one health condition.

Some conditions are mild; others are serious.

Some health conditions may not be noticeable until the baby gets older.

What are the main types of birth differences?

Many birth differences are structural, meaning that an organ did not develop properly. Examples include:

Spina bifida

Cleft lip or palate

Hip dysplasia

A hole in the heart

Other birth differences involve chromosomes, such as:

Down syndrome

Fragile X syndrome

Turner syndrome

Some birth differences affect body functions, including:

Cerebral palsy

Cystic fibrosis

Haemophilia

What are the main causes of birth differences?

Key causes include:

Harmful substances: Exposure to radiation, chemicals, medicines, alcohol, smoking, or drugs increases the risk, especially in the first 3 months of pregnancy.

Infections: Some infections during pregnancy can harm the baby, such as:
Chickenpox Cytomegalovirus (CMV) Rubella Toxoplasmosis Parvovirus B19

Chickenpox

Cytomegalovirus (CMV)

Rubella

Toxoplasmosis

Parvovirus B19

Genetics: If either parent carries an abnormal gene or chromosome, they may pass it on to the baby. Genetic screening can be done before conception.

Age and health: The older you are, the higher the chance of having a baby with a health condition. Women under 20 also face a higher risk. Poor diet, obesity, and diabetes can also increase risk.

Chickenpox

Cytomegalovirus (CMV)

Rubella

Toxoplasmosis

Parvovirus B19

Can these health conditions be prevented?

You can lower the risk by:

Maintaining a healthy weight

Avoiding smoking, drugs, and alcohol before and during pregnancy

Taking folate and iodine supplements from one month before conception

Ensuring that medicines are safe for pregnancy

Getting vaccinated against rubella and chickenpox if not immune

Considering genetic testing if there's a family history of disorders

Can these health conditions be detected during pregnancy?

Structural conditions can be detected by ultrasound around 18 to 20 weeks. Screening tests for chromosomal disorders, like Down syndrome, may include blood tests and ultrasounds.

If a screening shows higher risk, you may choose a diagnostic test, such as amniocentesis, to confirm a chromosomal problem.

If my baby has a health condition, how is my care managed during pregnancy and birth?

If tests show a health condition, talk to your doctor or midwife. They may refer you to a specialist for monitoring and treatment options, such as surgery or medication.

How are health conditions managed after the baby is born?

A doctor will examine the baby and arrange tests if necessary. Newborn screening tests, like the "heel prick test," detect serious conditions.

If any issues are found, it's important to discuss the next steps with your baby's doctor.

Tools and Assistance

If your baby has a health condition, speak to a genetic counselor for information and support. Your healthcare provider can also guide you to helpful resources.