

# Anencephaly

## What is it?



Anencephaly

Anencephaly (pronounced an-en-sef-uh-lee) is a serious birth defect of the brain and skull. **Anencephaly** occurs when a baby is born without parts or all of the brain and skull. It is a type of **neural tube defect**. The **neural tube** helps form the brain, skull, spinal cord, and back bones. The neural tube usually closes within the first few weeks of pregnancy. In anencephaly, the upper part of the neural tube does not close all the way. A baby with anencephaly will be missing the front part of his or her brain, called the **forebrain**, and the thinking and coordinating part of the brain, called the **cerebrum**. The remaining parts of the brain are often not covered by bone or skin. A baby with anencephaly is usually blind, deaf, unconscious, and unable to feel pain. Some babies with anencephaly may have a partial brain stem. That would allow breathing and responding to touch and sound.

Image courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities

## How common is it?

Anencephaly is rare. About 2 to 5 of every 10,000 babies are born with anencephaly each year.

## What causes it?

The exact cause of anencephaly is not known. There may be many factors that cause it. Taking folic acid before and during pregnancy significantly decreases the chance of having a baby with neural tube defects, such as anencephaly.

## How is it diagnosed and treated?

Anencephaly can be diagnosed during pregnancy by screening tests or by physical examination after the baby is born. There is no treatment or cure for anencephaly. Almost all babies born with anencephaly die before birth or shortly after birth.