

**Three Minute Article for Parents**

**Congenital heart defect: Commonest inborn abnormality in children**

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*Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, 2022; **51**(3): 494

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4038/slch.v51i3.10269>

(Keywords: Congenital heart defect, Child)

Congenital heart defect is a structural abnormality of the heart or great vessels which is present when a baby is born. In a research survey, we found it to be the commonest abnormality seen among newborns, accounting for over 25% of inborn structural defects<sup>1</sup>.

Congenital heart defects may be simple or complex. Simple heart defects may go unnoticed for life or may be detected by a doctor within a day or two of birth, at vaccination clinic, at school medical check-up or when the child presents to a doctor for a minor illness. Complex heart defects represent a major disturbance in the structure of the heart or a cluster of structural heart defects, making the baby evidently sick at some stage in infancy or childhood.

A proportion of complex heart defects will make the baby sick from birth onwards or within a few days or weeks after birth and will lead to severe ill health or death of the baby. Some complex heart defects do not show any signs externally or on examination until the baby becomes critically ill.

Causes for congenital heart defects are often not identifiable. Known risk factors are rubella infection in early pregnancy, tobacco and alcohol consumption, diabetes in pregnancy and poor nutritional status in the mother. Heart defects can be present as an association in certain syndromes such as Down syndrome or Turner syndrome.

A simple screening test, the pulse oximeter assessment of all 4 limbs, was introduced in the USA in 2011 to identify newborns having critical heart defects by two days of age. This same screening test was introduced in Sri Lanka from January 2017. This has immensely helped the medical staff to identify critical heart defects prior to discharge of newborns from hospital, and avoid a catastrophe at home.

It is important for parents, care givers and teachers to be aware of tell-tale signs of heart defects in young children. Poor growth, easy fatigue, breathlessness at play, frequent chest infections, bluish tinge around lips, especially on crying, bluish tongue, lips or nailbeds are a few recognizable clues to heart defects. Hence, it is important to seek medical advice for your child if the mentioned signs are noted.

In Sri Lanka, treatment is available by expert medical and surgical units once diagnosis of a heart defect is confirmed. Early medical attention is crucial to avoid further damage to the heart and to prevent avoidable deaths.

**Reference**

1. K S Y Perera, Nimesha Chamidani Gamhewage, Medha Weerasekera. Prospective study on incidence and pattern of congenital abnormalities in a tertiary care hospital in Sri Lanka. *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health*, 2019; **48**(4): 321-325