

DIAPHRAGMATIC HERNIA

What is a diaphragmatic hernia?

A diaphragmatic hernia results when there is an abnormal opening in the diaphragm into the chest cavity, resulting in abdominal contents going through the diaphragm and into the chest. There may be intestines, stomach, liver, spleen, or even a kidney pushed into the chest cavity. This happened while the baby was still inside its mother. Because this happened before he/she was born, the lungs do not have room to grow properly.

How will the doctors know if my baby has a diaphragmatic hernia?

Diaphragmatic hernias are not very common. As soon as the baby is born he/she will have difficulty breathing (respiratory distress) and may be blue. Your baby's abdomen may be concave (sunken in) instead of rounded, because part of the abdominal contents are in the chest and not in the belly where they belong. A chest x-ray will confirm whether your baby has a diaphragmatic hernia or not.

My baby has a diaphragmatic hernia, now what?

Having a diaphragmatic hernia is a life threatening illness that is also a surgical emergency. Your baby will have a tube placed from his/her nose into his/her stomach and attached to suction. This will help get rid of any air that is in the stomach and help your baby to breathe a bit better. Your baby will be on a breathing machine. Your baby's lung (usually left) has not grown properly because of the abdominal contents in the chest. The breathing machine will help him/her to breathe.

Often, the baby has severe problems getting enough oxygen into the blood related to the undergrown lung. How large the lung is on the 'unaffected' side will often determine whether or not the baby can survive. Sometimes, the baby has problems that are so severe, he or she will need to be put on a heart/lung bypass machine (ECMO-extracorporeal membrane oxygenation) until the lungs can grow enough to support the baby. If this is the case, your doctor will discuss this with you at that time.

Once your baby is stable, he/she will be taken to the operating room to fix the hole in the diaphragm and put the abdominal contents back in the belly where they belong.

Even though your baby went to surgery to have the problem fixed, he/she will still be hospitalized for quite a while. Even though the defect has been fixed, there still is a small lung to deal with. This will take some time, but should slowly improve.

Children with diaphragmatic hernias can be quite sick. Your doctor will talk to you about your baby's problems.