

Living with a Shunt

One of a series of fact sheets for **PARENTS** produced by the Family Support Service

What is Shunt?

A shunt is a soft, white silicone tube that can be placed inside the brain to drain excess fluid into the stomach. Occasionally, this fluid can be drained into one of the chambers of the heart (known as the atrium) where it can be absorbed back into the blood as normal.

Why is a shunt needed?

A shunt is required because there is too much fluid in the brain. It is perfectly normal for the brain to produce fluid but it is usually absorbed back into the bloodstream. Sometimes there is too much fluid produced or not enough is absorbed - this is known as hydrocephalus.

This can be treated with a shunt and many children have shunts since hydrocephalus is quite a common condition. There are around 3,500 operations of this nature done in the UK each year.

What types of tests are required?

There are a number of tests that can be carried out to confirm the diagnosis and help the doctor decide where the shunt should be placed.

CT/MRI Scanning

This test is quick and painless and basically takes pictures of the inside of the head.

X-RAY

Again, this test is quick and pain-free and allows the doctor to see pictures of the shunt; helping to make sure the correct treatment is given.

What does the operation involve?

The shunt operation is very straightforward and is finished in about one hour. A small cut is made in the head and one in the stomach, allowing the shunt to be placed in the correct position. There are no signs on the outside of the body that a shunt is in place.

How can I be sure it's working?

At first, it is natural to be concerned that the shunt is working properly. Children with shunts get colds and infections, especially in winter, just like all other children. This does not affect the functioning of the shunt and it will continue to work as normal. Sometimes, though, there are signs that can help you know that it is not working.

How do I know if it is not working?

If your child is less than 2 years old, an early indication can be fontanelle bulging - a swelling of the soft spot on the top of the head. If the child is older, headaches or nausea can indicate that the shunt is not working properly. If your child has any of these signs, particularly if there are no signs of a cold, sore throat or other infection, then you should seek medical advice.

Are there alternative treatments?

Temporary:

Temporary treatments may include the use of a drain, known as an EVD, to draw the fluid into a bag outside the body.

Permanent:

In some cases, the surgeon may be able to treat hydrocephalus or a brain cyst without a shunt. This can be done with a brain telescope using a process known as neuro endoscopy (or third ventriculostomy). Typically, the MRI scan will show whether neuro endoscopy or a shunt is the most suitable treatment. The brain telescope can be used to open up new routes to allow the fluid to drain away.

If you have any questions or would like further information, please do not hesitate to contact the Family Support Workers at:

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