

# Iraqi Child With Spina Bifida Travels To Atlanta For Surgery

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After being rescued by soldiers of the Georgia Army National Guard's 48th Brigade during a home raid in Baghdad in early December, 3-month-old Iraqi "Baby Noor" was flown to Children's Healthcare of Atlanta to receive life-saving surgery. Baby Noor was born with spina bifida, a birth defect in which the spinal column fails to completely close. She is being treated by Roger Hudgins, M.D., chief of neurosurgery at Children's. Dr. Hudgins will be assisted by Fernando Burstein, M.D., Medical Director of the Center for Craniofacial Disorders at Children's. Children's and the surgeons have offered to perform the delicate operation at no cost.

## **Baby Noor's Discovery**

As the Iraqi family nervously watched the soldiers search their home, the baby's grandmother brought to the soldiers' attention a purple pouch protruding from the infant's back. Iraqi doctors had told Noor's parents she would live only 45 days without corrective surgery. The members of the 48th Brigade vowed to do whatever it took to bring the little girl to the U.S. for the medical care she so desperately needed.

On the soldiers' newly adopted "mission" to save Baby Noor, they dispatched their pleas to numerous contacts in the U.S., including the office of Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.). Chambliss' office then contacted Children's, which immediately agreed to donate its services to Baby Noor. In the meantime, Childspring International, an Atlanta-based organization that seeks medical care for children worldwide, worked with Sen. Chambliss and contacts stateside and abroad to arrange for necessary paperwork to bring Noor and her family to Atlanta. The organization also identified a host family to house Noor's family while she was being treated at Children's and responded to the community's offers of support.

"It is an honor for me to help this child who means so much to our Army National Guard," Hudgins said. "After all, these are the brave men and women who risk their lives daily to serve our country. I feel privileged to play whatever role I can in helping them and this child."

During the surgery, Hudgins plans to place the spinal cord down the center of Noor's back and cover it with muscle and tissue. Dr. Hudgins has requested the assistance of craniofacial surgeon, Dr. Fernando Burstein, a plastic surgeon with specialized training in the diagnosis and treatment of skeletal abnormalities of the skull and facial bones. Dr. Burstein will help ensure that Baby Noor not only feels normal after surgery, but that the skin on her back heals properly following surgery.

"I am honored to have the opportunity to play a role in Baby Noor's surgery and will strive to ensure that she will be as normal as possible, have a smooth recovery and enjoy a healthy

childhood," Burstein said.

## **What Is Spina Bifida?**

Spina bifida is a birth defect in which the bones of the spine (vertebrae) do not form properly around the spinal cord. This can occur anywhere along the spine. Spina bifida is the most common of a group of birth defects called neural tube defects.

Spina bifida develops in a fetus early in pregnancy, often before a woman knows she is pregnant. In the United States, about 1 in every 2,000 children is born with spina bifida. It is one of the most common birth defects, although the rates have declined steadily in recent years.

There are two main types of spina bifida: spina bifida occulta and spina bifida manifesta.

Spina bifida occulta is the milder form. The spinal defect is hidden under the skin and does not usually cause problems or need treatment. Doctors estimate that 10 to 24 percent of the general population unknowingly have this spinal defect. In some cases, a dimple, depression, birthmark or hairy patch forms over the skin where more than one vertebrae is affected. This is referred to as occult spinal dysraphism (OSD).

Spina bifida aperta is the more severe form of this birth defect. It often is associated with nerve damage that can result in problems with walking, bladder control and coordination. It can be separated into two classes, meningocele and myelomeningocele.

-- In meningocele, fluid leaks out of the spinal canal, causing a swollen area over the baby's spine.

-- In myelomeningocele, a segment of the spinal nerves pushes out of the spinal canal against the underside of the skin. The nerves are often damaged. In the worst cases, the skin is open and the nerves are exposed to the outside of the body.

Baby Noor has been diagnosed with myelomeningocele (spina bifida aperta) and is tentatively scheduled for surgery on Monday, January 9. Children's Healthcare of Atlanta will not have any further information or updates until Baby Noor is readmitted to Children's.

**Children's Healthcare of Atlanta**, one of the leading pediatric healthcare systems in the country, is a not-for-profit organization that benefits from the generous philanthropic and volunteer support of our community. With 430 licensed beds in two hospitals and more than 450,000 annual patient visits, Children's is nationally recognized for excellence in cancer, cardiac, neonatal, orthopaedic and transplant care, as well as in many other pediatric specialties. Child magazine ranks Children's as one of the top 10 children's hospitals nationwide and Children's is among U.S. News & World Report's top pediatric hospitals. To learn more about Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, visit [www.choa.org](http://www.choa.org) or call 404-250-KIDS.

**Childspring International**, a faith-based, non-profit organization, aims to give children around the world expert medical care and opportunities for a better life. Based in Atlanta, Childspring

has provided treatment to hundreds of children in more than 20 states across the U.S. and in more than 38 countries worldwide. The non-profit organization relies on monetary and in-kind donations to provide children with the best help possible. To get involved or to find out more about Childspring International please visit <http://www.childspringintl.org> or call 404.228.7744.

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