A myelomeningocele is an opening in a baby's back that contains some of the spinal cord and the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF).

**What causes a myelomeningocele?**
Doctors do not know the exact cause of a myelomeningocele. This problem begins during the first month of pregnancy, usually before the mother knows she is pregnant.

**Treatment for Myelomeningocele**
The opening can be seen on the baby's back at birth. A dressing will be placed over it to protect it until the baby goes to surgery. A surgeon will repair the myelomeningocele usually within two days if the baby has no other complications.

You will see a bandage covering the surgical incision when your baby returns from surgery. To protect the surgical area, your baby will be placed on her side or stomach—not her back—until the wound has healed. When the baby begins to feed, she should be held so that pressure will be kept off the dressing while you nurse her or give her a bottle.

Often after surgery, the baby develops hydrocephalus—an increased head size due to poor circulation of the cerebral spinal fluid (CSF). This will be treated. Your child's urination and bowel movements will also be watched closely since children with a myelomeningocele often have problems with this.

**Exercises**
Your baby might not be able to move her legs well because of damage to nerve tissue. Doctors and therapists will check her to see how well she can move her legs and arms. She needs exercise to strengthen the muscles and help prevent her arms and legs from becoming stiff, since she may not be able to use them very well. You will be taught to do these exercises so you can do them with your baby.

**Home care**
Your baby will not be discharged until the back incision is healed and she is feeding well and gaining weight steadily. She will be scheduled for follow-up visits with the neurosurgeon, urologist, physical therapist, and possibly an orthopedist in the Spina Bifida Clinic to keep up with her development and to treat or try to prevent any complications.

(continued)
Your baby’s future
A myelomeningocele affects every child and family in different ways. In order for your baby to be as healthy as possible, regular visits to your doctors and your local spina bifida clinic are very important.

Throughout your baby's childhood, as she grows and changes, other problems might develop. When doctors find problems early, the problems are easier to treat.

Important phone numbers at Vanderbilt
Neurosurgery Office (615) 322-6875
Spina Bifida Clinic (615) 936-2457 or 1-800-526-4299
NICU (615) 322-0963