

# Premature babies at high risk of blindness, says study

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**Bhubaneswar:** The threat of blindness among babies born prematurely in the state is looming large with a study done by ophthalmologists here finding out barriers that are coming in way of providing appropriate care for Retinopathy of Prematurity (RoP), a cause of blindness among premature children.

The study was done by a group of ophthalmologists from LV Prasad Eye Institute here, which was published in the Indian Journal of Ophthalmology, a publication of All India Ophthalmological Society. The study finds out that the absence of a system at newborn intensive care units (NICUs) for RoP screening and failure of child care providers to diagnose contributed to the situation.

According to the findings, nearly 63.3% children born prematurely and admitted to the NICUs in the tertiary care facilities are exposed to the blindness condition. While 26.7% children are exposed because of parental neglect, another 10% due to failure by eye care providers in detecting



the problem.

"We examined 71 babies out of which 50 babies had received an ophthalmic examination, some early and a majority of them late. RoP was confirmed in two out of 15 early-examined children and 13 of 35 late-examined children," said Dr Tapas Ranjan Padhi, consultant, retina vitreous services, LV Prasad Eye Institute.

Padhi said the RoP is in an epidemic condition in the state. "There is a need of higher advocacy in the subject. A small screening in premature babies in NICU level can be able to avoid the possible blindness among them. The government needs to come up with a policy to tackle the epidemic," the consultant said. He further said the parents also need to be educated on the same so that they will be able to ask a doctor for the screening of RoP at an early stage. "We have been providing training on RoP scree-

ning to the ophthalmologists in hospitals in the city and its surroundings, but it has to be done in a broader manner," Padhi suggested.

Experts further urged the authorities to start spreading awareness that RoP could affect babies born under age and underweight and it needs skills to diagnose and treat such cases. Blindness due to RoP is largely preventable when treated early.

Keeping ophthalmological tests at NICUs is one of the clauses to open such a facility at government as well as private healthcare institutions, but since it has not made mandatory in the rules, NICUs in the state are running without the service giving rise to the fear of blindness among children admitted in them, said a doctor.

"If a baby is born prematurely, he or she is immediately admitted to NICUs where they were put on ventilation. Lack of oxygen is another reason that could cause blindness among them. There are NICUs at government as well as private facilities but a majority of them do not have the facility for eye test, which is a concern," Padhi said.