An **atrial septal defect** (pronounced EY-tree-uhl SEP-tuhl) is a type of congenital heart defect. *Congenital* means present at birth. Normally, there are several openings in the wall dividing the upper parts of the heart during pregnancy. The upper parts of the heart are called **atria**.

The wall that separates the **atria** is called a **septum**. These openings in the septum usually close during pregnancy or shortly after birth, but if one of the openings does not close, a hole is left. This hole is called an **atrial septal defect**. The hole increases the amount of blood that flows through the lungs. Over time blood vessels in the lungs may be damaged, which may cause high blood pressure and heart failure. Other problems can include abnormal heartbeat and increased risk of stroke. An atrial septal defect may be seen with other congenital heart defects or alone.

It’s estimated that about 1,966 babies in the U.S. are born with an atrial septal defect each year. This is about 2 per 1,000 live births each year.
The cause of atrial septal defect among most babies is unknown. There may be many factors that cause atrial septal defects, but more research is needed.

An atrial septal defect may be diagnosed during pregnancy or after birth. Screening tests during pregnancy can check for birth defects. After birth an atrial septal defect can be found if a murmur is heard. Signs and symptoms may not be seen if the hole is small, though. If an atrial septal defect is suspected, a cardiologist, a doctor who specializes in heart conditions, will confirm the diagnosis. The cardiologist may perform an echocardiogram, which is a special test to look at the heart, to diagnose an ASD.

Treatment of an atrial septal defect may vary. The size of the hole typically determines the treatment options. A doctor may want to wait and see if it closes on its own, and medications may be prescribed to help treat any serious symptoms. Surgery may be necessary in some cases. Your child’s doctor should discuss these options with you.

For more information:
American Heart Association
http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Conditions/CongenitalHeartDefects/AboutCongenitalHeartDefects/About-Congenital-Heart-Defects_UCM_001217_Article.jsp#Wv2YtPnwbcsc

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/heartdefects/atrialseptaldefect.html

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute
https://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health-topics/congenital-heart-defects