

California conjoined twins separated in successful surgery

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In this photo taken Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2016, the family of conjoined twins Erika and Eva Sandoval, left to right, Aniza, Emilio, Art, Aida and Esmeralda, surround them in the pre-operating room the morning of their separation surgery in Palo Alto, Calif. Eva and Erika Sandoval have become two separate toddlers following a 17-hour marathon surgery at the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford that began on Tuesday, officials said. The 2-year-old Sacramento area girls were born conjoined from the chest down and shared a bladder, liver, parts of their digestive system and a third leg. (Lezlie Sterling/The Sacramento Bee via AP)

Conjoined California twins Eva and Erika Sandoval have become two separate toddlers following a 17-hour marathon surgery and are recovering "quite well," officials said Thursday.

The Sacramento Bee reported (bit.ly/2h8qFci) the 2-year-old Sacramento area girls were born conjoined from the chest down and shared a bladder, liver, parts of their digestive system and a third leg.

Their parents said each girl has retained portions of the organs they shared. Each girl still has one leg and surgeons told the newspaper both would likely need a prosthetic leg. The third limb was used for skin grafts to cover surgical wounds.

Their parents were overjoyed with the success of the separation, which has been in the planning stages since before the girls were born.

"They look amazing. They're amazing. They have their hair done, and they're resting," said mother Aida Sandoval. "We're just going to take it one day at a time and let them catch up on their rest."

At a news conference Thursday afternoon, she said she has seen the twins separated and awake.

"The first time I saw the girls it was very surreal," she said. "And it's still very surreal."

Speaking through tears and in both Spanish and English, she said it's been a "long journey to get here."

"It's really been a dream come true," she said.

The twins are in stable condition and are expected to remain in intensive care for up to two weeks, Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford

officials said.

Lead surgeon Dr. Gary Hartman said a team of 50 worked on the procedure.



In this photo taken Tuesday, Dec. 6, 2016, Aida and Art Sandoval celebrate after hearing their conjoined twins were separated successfully in Palo Alto, Calif. Conjoined California twins Eva and Erika Sandoval have become two separate toddlers following a 17-hour marathon surgery at the Lucile Packard Children's Hospital Stanford that began on Tuesday, officials said. The 2-year-old Sacramento area girls were born conjoined from the chest down and shared a bladder, liver, parts of their digestive system and a third leg. (Lezlie Sterling/The Sacramento Bee via AP)

"(It's) the same goal we have for all of our children: that we end up with two, happy healthy girls," Hartman said.

"Anyone who saw the girls before surgery can testify to the happy part," which he credited entirely to their parents, Hartman said. "We think that this week we made a big step toward the healthy part. The girls are recovering quite well."

He also explained that each girl now has half a belly button so in the future they will always remember their connection to the other girl.

Following such surgeries, the first 72 hours are typically the most critical, said Dr. James Goodrich, director of pediatric neurosurgery at Children's Hospital at Montefiore in New York. Goodrich has successfully performed seven cranial separations of twins joined at the brain.

"That's the window. That's when the worst stuff happens," he said, citing infections, bleeding and other complications. "If you make it through without any serious consequences, you're not out of the woods," he said, but odds of survival improve.

As few as one of every 200,000 births results in conjoined twins. About 50 percent of such twins are born stillborn, and 35 percent survive only one day, according to the University of Maryland Medical Center.

Only a few hundred surgeries have been performed successfully to separate conjoined twins. Stanford doctors had calculated a 30 percent chance that one or both twins wouldn't make it through the operation.

About 40 family members gathered at the hospital with the parents to lend support and talk about the twins. Erika, their mother explained, is quiet and likes to sing and dance but has a feisty side. Eva is a "clown" who loves to make people laugh.

"They've always been two little people emotionally," said one of the

twins' sisters, Esmeralda, 25, who celebrated with a teary-eyed smile.
"It's the physical part that's difficult to grasp."

The couple's oldest daughter, Aniza, credited her parents' level-headed strength for pursuing the operation.

"Despite everything they've been told—the percentages of life and death—they stayed positive throughout their whole journey," she said.
"It only means that the rest of their future, our future as a family, will always be positive and looking at the glass half-full."

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