

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a term used for a group of non-contagious and non-progressive disorders affecting a child's ability to move and maintain balance and body position. It is one of the most common childhood disorders that can occur during pregnancy, child birth or after birth. CP is not currently curable. However, training, getting the right therapy, special equipment and, in some cases, surgery can make a big difference.

What causes Cerebral Palsy?

CP is caused by damage to the motor control centers of the developing brain. There are many possible causes of the brain damage, and the causes of most cases are unknown. Some of the known causes include:

- *Maternal infections:* German measles (rubella), chickenpox (varicella), cytomegalovirus, toxoplasmosis and syphilis (a sexually transmitted disease) are linked to CP.
- *Infant illnesses:* *Meningitis* (causing inflammation of the protective membranes covering the brain and spinal cord) and *viral encephalitis* (causing inflammation of the brain itself) are also linked to CP.
- *Congenital abnormalities* can affect how the child's brain develops during the first 6 months of pregnancy. Exposure to toxins and radiation increases the risk of mutations in genes that are responsible for brain development.
- *Other causes* include bleeding in the brain, head injury, lack of oxygen and severe jaundice.
- *Premature birth, very low birth-weight, breech births (feet-first position), multiple babies, using toxic substances during pregnancy and poor health of mothers during pregnancy* are additional factors that may increase the risk of cerebral palsy.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Depending on how much of the brain is affected and which parts of the body are controlled by that section of the brain, the child can have a mild or severe case of CP. While early signs may be present from birth, if signs and symptoms are mild, definite diagnosis might be difficult before the age of 4 or 5 years. Generally, cerebral palsy is diagnosed by the 1st or 2nd year.

Signs and symptoms of CP may include lack of muscle coordination, stiff muscles, irregular walking with one foot or leg dragging, variations in muscle tone (too stiff to too floppy), too much drooling, difficulty in swallowing, sucking or speaking, and tremors.

In addition to varying degrees of physical disabilities, some children with cerebral palsy may also have associated medical problems such as difficulty with vision, hearing and speech, mental problems, mental retardation, seizures, abnormal sensation and urinary incontinence that may require long term care. About 50 percent of people with CP need to use braces, walkers, wheelchairs and other assistive devices.

Education for children with CP

Children with CP can live healthy lives and have the right to public education. They usually can go to school, make friends and do things they enjoy. However, they may need to do these things a little differently or with some help. In schools they will probably need individualized help. Fortunately, many programs are available to help them and states are responsible for meeting their educational needs. For children up to age three, services are provided through an early intervention system, and for school-aged children, including preschoolers, special education and related services are provided through the school system. For more information on inclusion visit California Childcare Health Program at www.ucsfchildcarehealth.org or call our Child Care Healthline (800) 333-3212.

Tips for coping with CP

- Join a cerebral palsy support group. A circle of support can make a big difference in helping you to cope with cerebral palsy.
- Encourage the child's independence and actively work on developing the child's skills.
- Be an advocate for your child and become an important part of your child's special care team.
- Gather information and learn more about your child's condition.

Resources

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Online at <https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/cerebral-palsy>

National Library of Medicine's Medline Plus at www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/cerebralpalsy.html



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