



Understanding Cerebral Palsy: A Guide for Families

What is cerebral palsy?

Cerebral palsy (also referred to as CP) is a disorder that affects body movement and muscle coordination. However, although it affects the muscles in our bodies, it is not caused by problems in the muscles themselves or the nerves. Cerebral palsy is caused either by the failure of the brain to develop properly during pregnancy or damage to the brain, before, during or after birth. In fact, the word *cerebral* means having to do with the brain, while *palsy* means muscle weakness.

While the severity of this disorder has a wide range (from a slightly awkward walk to whole body weakness requiring the use of a wheelchair), cerebral palsy is usually classified into four categories:

- 1. Spastic cerebral palsy** occurs when muscles are extremely tight, causing stiff movement of the body. It is the most common form of cerebral palsy and accounts for a majority of CP cases.
- 2. Athetoid cerebral palsy** involves slow, uncontrolled, writhing movements. It usually affects the arms, legs, hands or feet. In some cases, the muscles of the face or tongue are affected, causing drooling or grimacing.
- 3. Ataxic cerebral palsy** affects depth perception and balance. This usually means that patients walk unsteadily with feet placed widely apart and have a difficult time with precise movement (i.e. buttoning a shirt).
- 4. Hypotonic cerebral palsy** involves very low muscle tone and muscle weakness especially in the trunk and arms and legs, but with reflexes (such as the knee swing) that are stronger than normal.

Although doctors classify cerebral palsy into those four main categories, it is not unusual for patients to have symptoms of more than one of those major types. Therefore, you should be aware of mixed forms of cerebral palsy, where the most common tends to include spasticity and athetoid movements.

While the symptoms of cerebral palsy may change over the course of the lifetime, the actual brain injury does not get worse. Also, you should remember that cerebral palsy is not contagious and cannot be passed from parent to child.

How do you receive this diagnosis?

Most diagnoses of cerebral palsy take place before the age of 3. However, for children with mild cerebral palsy, it may not be diagnosed until they are 4 or 5 years-old. If a doctor suspects that a child has cerebral palsy, he or she will usually schedule an appointment to check up on the child's physical and behavior development. Your child may be evaluated by many doctors, including a pediatric neurologist, a pediatric orthopedist (bone/limb doctor), pediatric ophthalmologist (eye doctor), a pediatric ENT/otologist (ear doctor), and a developmental pediatrician in order to make sure that cerebral palsy is the right diagnosis and that your child gets the right treatments.

How do you manage this diagnosis?

Although there is no cure for cerebral palsy, there are a variety of treatments available. Symptoms can usually improve with early, intensive management, which works on functioning, capabilities, and quality of life. Treatments can include:

- **Physical therapy** to improve walking, stretch muscles, and prevent deformities
- **Occupational therapy** to develop strategies for everyday living, with a focus on activities such as dressing
- **Speech therapy** to help with any swallowing problems or speech impediments
- **Braces** to help compensate for muscle imbalance and can help with posture and walking
- **Mechanical aids** (such as wheelchairs or walkers) to increase mobility
- **Communication aids** (such as computers) can help with communication for the more severely impaired
- **Medications** to help with muscle contractions, reduce shaking, and relax muscles.

Ideally, you and your doctors should share information back and forth. You should be partners and you should decide on the treatment plan together, with a focus on your child's and family's needs. The best management strategy for cerebral palsy involves a team approach that includes parents and caregivers, doctors and other health professionals. Many times, the best care is given in a cerebral palsy multi-disciplinary clinic, where all of the specialists come together at one place and time to plan.



RESOURCES

American Academy for Cerebral Palsy and Developmental Medicine

aacpdm.org
(847) 698-1635

California Assistive Technology Services

abilitytools.org
(800) 390-2699

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

www.ninds.nih.gov
(800) 352-9424

United Cerebral Palsy of Los Angeles

ucpla.org
(818) 782-2211

For additional information, you may also contact
WRC's Staff Psychologist Kaely Shilakes, Psy.D
who can be reached at (310) 258-4157.



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