

## What is cerebral palsy?

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a neurologic (brain) disorder that changes the way the brain communicates with muscles. This causes lifelong difficulty with movement, strength, and balance.

## What causes cerebral palsy?

About 3 of every 1,000 babies born will develop cerebral palsy. CP occurs when there is abnormal development or damage to areas of the brain that control movement. Most of these problems occur as the baby grows in the womb, but they can happen at any time during birth or the first few years of life, while the brain is still developing.

Although the specific cause is often unknown, many things increase the risk for CP, including:

- Prematurity
- Genetic abnormalities
- Bleeding in the brain
- Substance abuse during pregnancy
- Very low birth weight
- Trauma
- Infections of the body or brain
- Complications during labor/delivery

We can sometimes determine a cause for CP based on a child's medical history or by evaluating the structure of their brain through brain imaging. Sometimes a cause is never found.

## What are the symptoms of cerebral palsy?

The symptoms of cerebral palsy can range from mild to severe. Symptoms include weakness or stiffness in parts of the body. Babies with CP may have delays in early development; they are often slow to roll over, sit, crawl, walk, or talk. As children get older, they often develop more stiffness (called **spasticity**) or have involuntary shaking (called **clonus**) in their arms or legs.

Many children with CP also have other problems, which can include:

- Difficulty eating or drinking, causing poor weight gain
- Frequent lung infections
- Difficulty with learning, focus, or behavior
- Problems with hearing or speaking
- Vision or eye problems, such as being "cross-eyed" or having a "lazy eye" (called **strabismus**)
- Seizures
- Curvature of the spine (called **scoliosis**)

## How is cerebral palsy diagnosed?

The diagnosis of CP is made through history and physical exams. There is no specific test or study for cerebral palsy. The diagnosis is often delayed until a child is at least 6 to 12 months old. Medical providers may want to observe a child's early development and watch for symptoms to develop as the child grows. Sometimes, other tests such as an MRI (a type of brain image) can help identify brain injuries. In some cases, blood work may be done, including genetic testing or metabolic testing.

## What is the treatment for cerebral palsy?

While there is no cure for cerebral palsy, there are treatments to help minimize the symptoms. Therapies (such as physical, occupational, speech, and behavioral therapy) are the most important treatment.

- Many children benefit from **therapies** that encourage and support movement, mobility, motor skills, and speech.
- **Equipment** such as leg braces, walkers, or wheelchairs can improve mobility.
- **Medicines** can relieve muscle tightness.
- **Surgery** is sometimes done to help increase movement and positioning of joints in the arms, legs, hips, or back.

## What will life be like with cerebral palsy?

Cerebral palsy can be very mild or very severe. Children with mild forms of cerebral palsy live as long as people without the disorder and lead full, productive lives. They may need some therapies or medical services to help support their development and reduce the impact of the disorder. Children with moderate or severe cerebral palsy may require more involved medical care, including special equipment or nursing care in the home. Children with the most severe forms of cerebral palsy might have shortened lives due to medical complications of their disorder.

## Resources and References:

<https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/cerebral-palsy>  
<https://www.kidshealth.org/en/parents/cerebral-palsy.html>  
<https://cerebralspalsy.org/>