

Cerebral palsy

What is cerebral palsy?

Cerebral palsy, or CP, is an umbrella term that refers to a group of disorders affecting a person's ability to move. Cerebral means 'of the brain' and palsy refers to 'a lack of muscle control'.

Types of cerebral palsy

Cerebral palsy affects the control and coordination of muscles, so it affects a person's posture, movement and balance. Some people who have cerebral palsy also have problems with sight, hearing, speech and learning. Some have epilepsy.

People with severe cerebral palsy might also have difficulties with swallowing, breathing and eating. They might have trouble controlling their head and neck, and might have trouble with their bladders and bowels.

Some people find one side of the body is affected much more than the other. Some find their legs are much more affected than their arms.

Each person is different. One person might have weakness in one hand and find tasks like writing or tying shoelaces challenging. Another person may have little or no control over their movements or speech and need assistance day and night.

Causes

For most people with cerebral palsy, the cause is unknown and there is no single cause. It is due to an injury to the brain, usually while the mother is pregnant or in the first month of life.

Which babies are at highest risk?

Babies are at higher risk than others of having cerebral palsy if:

- they are boys
- they are born small
- they are born early
- they are one of twins or triplets
- their mother had an infection while pregnant
- there was a problem during the birth.

About 1% of people with cerebral palsy will also have a brother or sister with the condition.

Symptoms

Not all signs of cerebral palsy are visible at birth. Symptoms may become more obvious as babies and children develop.

Babies

Babies with cerebral palsy might:

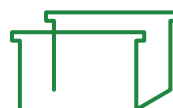
- feel floppy when picked up
- not be able to hold their head up
- have muscles that feel stiff
- be slow to develop
- have feeding or swallowing difficulties
- prefer to use one side of their body
- not make many sounds
- not take much notice of you.

Children

Physical development can be delayed, with children:

- not walking by 12–18 months
- not saying words or making simple sentences by 24 months
- having speech that is hard to understand
- having trouble eating or drinking certain types of foods

If your child is not reaching the usual milestones, or if they show some of these signs of cerebral palsy, you should talk to your early childhood nurse or doctor.



At CPA we help babies, children, teenagers and adults living with neurological and physical disabilities lead the most comfortable and independent lives possible. Our therapy teams work with individuals and families in many ways. Get in touch to find out how we can support you and improve your child's development.

Diagnosis

Cerebral palsy is a complex condition. Sometimes a diagnosis can take a long time, with repeated tests and visits to specialists. This may be because the child has a mild form of cerebral palsy, but it could also be because the doctor needs to make sure it is not another condition.

Sometimes a baby will have a general movements assessment, where the baby is videoed for five minutes. A health professional assesses how the baby moves. This can be done any time from birth until five months of age. If a general movements assessment suggests a baby is 'at risk of cerebral palsy', treatment and support can start as early as possible. A child does not need a clear diagnosis to start treatment.

If you are concerned, talk to your doctor and your early childhood nurse. If your concerns aren't addressed, get another opinion.

How do doctors diagnose cerebral palsy?

They will pay special attention to the child's movements and how their muscles feel. Doctors will also look for any unusual postures or if the child favours one side over the other.

They might order scans such as MRI or CT. And they will talk to you and listen to your concerns.

Living with cerebral palsy

Getting a diagnosis of cerebral palsy can be very distressing. Some parents think they should have known, or that they somehow caused it. That's not true. Families will need time to come to terms with all that is happening. Speaking with a doctor, a psychologist, counsellor or social worker and to Cerebral Palsy Alliance can be very helpful.

Treatment and therapy

Ideally, children with cerebral palsy will be cared for by a multi-disciplinary team that could include:

- a GP
- specialists such as a paediatrician, a neurologist, a surgeon or others
- an occupational therapist who helps children with tasks such as dressing or eating independently, and who can advise on suitable play activities
- a physiotherapist who helps children with skills such as picking things up and walking, and can also deal with problems like poor balance and muscle weakness
- a speech pathologist who helps with language development and can treat speech problems
- a child psychologist, who can monitor overall development and manage behavioural or emotional problems
- an audiologist, who can assess and advise on a child's hearing
- a special education teacher, who can help deliver an early intervention program and support a child in pre-school and school.

The multidisciplinary team will talk about a child's strengths and weaknesses, and will work with the child's family to develop a plan. That is likely to include:

- working out who is your first point of contact
- setting up a plan for regular assessments to check on progress
- some early intervention services.



Interpreters are available to support you through all of your appointments. Interpreters are free of charge from the government and can be included in your NDIS plan.

Get in touch with us:



Call us on 1300 888 378



Email us at ask@cerebralpalsy.org.au



Visit cerebralpalsy.org.au



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