

What Is Cerebral Palsy?

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a condition that affects how a person moves and controls their muscles. It can cause problems with posture, walking, coordination, and balance. CP is usually caused by a brain injury or issue in development before birth, during labor, or soon after. Sometimes genes play a role.

Just as every person is different, every person with cerebral palsy is different. CP impacts different parts of the body, causing symptoms that range from mild to severe. The first sign of CP is often a delay in movement milestones. For example, a baby might be late in rolling over, crawling, or walking.

Children with CP may have a hard time controlling their movements. Stiff, tight muscles, called spasticity, can make it hard to move arms and legs. Others may have loose, floppy muscles, called low muscle tone, making it hard to sit or hold their head up. Some children experience dystonia, where muscles move or tighten without control, causing spasms that look like their bodies are getting stuck. CP can affect the entire body or just one side.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common is cerebral palsy?

Cerebral palsy is the most common movement disability in children in the United States.

For Parents and Caregivers: What should I do if I suspect my child may have cerebral palsy?

Contact a medical provider if your child is not meeting movement milestones. They will ask about symptoms, do an exam, and may refer you to a specialist. You can also call your county's Early Intervention program for a free evaluation to find out if your child's developmental delays qualify for services such as physical, occupational, and/or speech therapy.

For Youth: What should I do if I think I may have cerebral palsy?

Talk to an adult you trust if you think your muscles are too tight or too weak, have trouble controlling your legs, think one side of your body doesn't feel as strong as the other side, or have frequent muscle tightening that you can't control. Don't ignore how you feel, getting help is important!

What kind of help is there for cerebral palsy?

Treatment for CP depends on each individual's needs. Common treatments include:

- **Early Intervention:** Specialists help babies and toddlers (up to age 3) reach developmental goals.
- **Physical therapy:** Helps stretch and strengthen muscles so children can move better.
- **Occupational therapy (OT):** Supports daily activities, such as learning how to use toys and utensils. As children get older, OT is important for building self-care skills such as dressing, eating, and bathing.

- **Assistive devices:** Tools like braces, wheelchairs, special seating, eye tracking devices, adaptive equipment, and more are available to help with mobility, communication, and other parts of daily living that might be more challenging because of CP.
- **Medical intervention:** Medications and injections can help relax muscles so movement is easier. Surgery is sometimes recommended if muscles or joints need help to move properly.

What other conditions are common in people with cerebral palsy?

Some people with CP may experience learning difficulties, seizures, or problems with vision, hearing, speech, or joint movement.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical providers or specialists, you might want to:

- Bring notes! Share your concerns as well as those others have observed.
- Ask what can be done to make your child more comfortable.
- Discuss what services or adaptations might be useful for your child.

What You Can Do at Home

Waiting for appointments and services with specialists can take time. It may help to:

- Keep up with regular checkups and vaccines.
- Incorporate exercises from therapy sessions into your everyday life.
- Make sure your child has toys and activities that they can use and enjoy.

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NYS Department of Health County Programs – CYSHCN



<https://on.ny.gov/43ho1ZK>

ACT for Youth: Cerebral Palsy



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About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine's Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

