



Cerebral Palsy

What is cerebral palsy?



Cerebral palsy is a brain injury that causes problems with a child's muscles. It can happen during pregnancy, at birth, or in infancy.

Each year, up to 10,000 babies are diagnosed with some form of cerebral palsy. It is the most common muscle disorder in children.

Cerebral palsy disrupts the brain's ability to "talk" to the muscles and nerves. Cerebral palsy can cause *hypotonia*, or very low muscle tone resulting in "floppy" muscles, or *hypertonia*, or

very high muscle tone resulting in overly stiff muscles.

Cerebral palsy affects *fine motor movement*, such as the ability to write, cut with scissors, and hold a fork, and *large motor movement*, such as sitting, crawling, and walking.

Parents are usually the first to notice the signs of cerebral palsy — for instance, a baby may not be sucking well when eating, or may not be meeting physical milestones on time. Diagnosing cerebral palsy may take several months and many doctor

visits and medical tests.

Cerebral palsy is not a progressive disorder. It does not get worse over time. The condition stays pretty much the same throughout life. A person with cerebral palsy may also have seizures, mental retardation, or other medical problems.

The disorder also occurs in varying degrees, from mild to severe. Children with severe cerebral palsy may never learn to walk, speak, or eat normally. Extensive, lifelong care may be required.

In milder cases, physical, speech, and occupational therapy can greatly improve a child's ability to walk, speak, and perform tasks that lead to independence.

At this time, there is no cure for cerebral palsy. Scientific research continues to find improved methods of treatment and prevention of the disorder.

Ways to help your child:

ONE

Learn how to properly position your child for feeding, play, and sleep. Correct positioning will allow the child to grow properly, and will keep muscles healthier and more active.

TWO

Allow your child to take part in everyday family activities as much as possible. Give your child the option to try activities before doing for them. Encourage independence, and support your child's efforts — even if it seems too difficult.

Resources:

Call [Early Access](tel:1-888-IAKIDS1) at 1-888-IAKIDS1 if you have child development questions or concerns.

Link to an [Area Education Agency](#) in your region for more child and family information:

www.iowaaea.org. Find a contact for your area under the [AEA Directory](#) tab.

[United Cerebral Palsy](#) offers basic information on the disorder, and advice on purchasing the best adaptive toys and equipment.

[Cerebral Palsy: A Complete Guide for Caregiving](#) by Dr. Freeman Miller, MD and Steven J. Bachrach, MD offers advice on every aspect of caring for your child at home.

[ZeroToThree](#) gives parents tips on how to help a child develop physical, social, language, and thinking skills.

This factsheet is part of an informational series for parents of children ages 0-5, developed by the Iowa Department of Education Early Childhood Services Bureau. (Updated April 2010)

Three important facts about cerebral palsy:

1. Cerebral palsy is caused by a brain injury.

In most cases, it is never known when the injury occurred. Cerebral palsy is not contagious, nor is it hereditary. It can be the result of a genetic defect, the mother having certain viruses while pregnant, very premature birth, or a lack of oxygen to the brain during pregnancy or at the time of birth.

2. In cerebral palsy, a child's muscles are not

damaged. They do not, however, function normally and the child will need intervention to help develop the muscles and keep them healthy.

3. Children with cerebral palsy can do most things.

Even if confined to a wheelchair, children can go to school, make friends, participate in family and activities, and even play certain individual and team sports.

THREE

Work closely with your child's medical team, and teachers. Doctors, special education teachers, and physical, speech, and occupational therapists will all have helpful ideas and information to keep your child active, both physically and mentally.

FOUR

Be a patient parent. Children with cerebral palsy can learn new skills, but usually at a slower pace. Instead of becoming frustrated with slow progress, celebrate the small victories.