

Editorial Note on Cerebral Palsy

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EDITORIAL NOTE

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a congenital disorder that occurs at or before birth. It affects the person's ability to move and maintain balance and posture. CP is the most common motor disability in childhood. It is caused by abnormal brain development or damage to the developing brain that affects a person's ability to control his or her muscles. There are several possible causes of the abnormal development or damage. People used to think that CP was mainly caused by lack of oxygen during the birth process. Now, scientists think that this causes only a small number of CP cases.

The brain damage that leads to CP can happen before birth, during birth, within a month after birth, or during the first years of a child's life, while the brain is still developing. CP related to brain damage that occurred before or during birth is called congenital CP. The majority of CP (85% to 90%) is congenital. In many cases, the specific cause is not known. A small percentage of CP is caused by brain damage that occurs more than 28 days after birth. This is called acquired CP, and usually is associated with an infection (such as meningitis) or head injury.

The symptoms of CP vary from person to person. A person with severe CP might need to use special equipment to be able to walk, or might not be able to walk at all and might need lifelong care. A person with mild CP, on the other hand, might walk a little awkwardly, but might not need any special help. CP does not get worse over time, though the exact symptoms can change over a person's lifetime. The signs of CP vary greatly because there are many different types and levels of disability. The main sign that a child might have CP is a delay reaching motor or movement milestones (such as rolling over, sitting, standing, or walking).

All people with CP have problems with movement and posture. Many also have related conditions such as intellectual disability; seizures; problems with vision, hearing, or speech; changes in the spine (such as scoliosis); or joint problems (such as contractures).

Doctors classify CP according to the main type of movement disorder involved. Depending on which areas of the brain are affected, one or more of the following movement disorders can occur: Stiff muscles (spasticity), Uncontrollable movements (dyskinesia), Poor balance and coordination (ataxia)

Diagnosing CP at an early age is important to the well-being of children and their families. Developmental monitoring (also called surveillance) is one of the ways to track a child's growth and development over time. If any concerns about the child's development are raised during monitoring, then a developmental screening test should be given as soon as possible.

Developmental screening is a short test given to see if the child has specific developmental delays, such as motor or movement delays. If the results of the screening test are cause for concern, then the doctor will make referrals for developmental and medical evaluations and finally the goal of a developmental evaluation is to diagnose the specific type of disorder that affects a child.

There is no specific cure for CP, but treatment can improve the lives of those who have the condition. It is important to begin a treatment program as early as possible. Common treatments include medicines; surgery; braces; and physical, occupational, and speech therapy. No single treatment is the best one for all children with CP. Before deciding on a treatment plan, it is important to talk with the child's doctor to understand all the risks and benefits.

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