



Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral Palsy (CP) is one of the most common congenital (existing before birth or at birth) disorders of childhood. About 500,000 children and adults in the U.S. have Cerebral Palsy, and the overall numbers are rising because premature babies, who are at great risk of Cerebral Palsy, are now beating the odds and surviving. Cerebral Palsy is a disorder that affects motor skills – the ability to move in a coordinated and purposeful way, muscle tone, and muscle movement. Under usual circumstances, people learn to move their muscles in a synchronized and smooth way, although simple motions, such as standing still, require a complicated interaction of muscles and nerves. However, for a child with Cerebral Palsy, even these usual movements are difficult. Other problems children with Cerebral Palsy may develop include: eating difficulties, bladder and bowel control problems, and breathing problems. Some children who have Cerebral Palsy also have other medical problems, such as seizures or epilepsy, hearing impairment, and speech problems, and though some children with Cerebral Palsy have learning disabilities or behavior problems, many do not.

Cerebral Palsy results from damage to the brain that occurs before, during, or after birth in the first 3 to 5 years of life. It is not contagious and is not a progressive condition. Although Cerebral Palsy cannot be cured, training, therapy, special equipment, and, in some cases, surgery can help a child with Cerebral Palsy lead a more functional life.

There are three types of Cerebral Palsy:

1) Spastic Cerebral Palsy

- The most common type, accounting for 70% and 80% of known cases
- Results in difficulty moving or stiff movements
- Affected region of the body varies as do associated difficulties

2) Athetoid Cerebral Palsy

- Occurs in 40% of all cases
- Difficulty controlling movement
- Have involuntary body movements

3) Ataxic Cerebral Palsy

- Less common type, occurring in at most 10% of all cases
- Difficulty with balance, coordination, and depth perception
- Movements often seem shaky

Children may have one types of CP or a combination, the most common being, Spastic and Athetoid types. Some children with Cerebral Palsy have only mild impairment of their motor abilities, others are severely affected, while many children have problems that fall in the mid-range of severity and need ongoing therapy and assistive devices such as braces or wheelchairs. Generally, 90% of children with Cerebral Palsy survive until their 20s and beyond. However, children with *quadriplegic* (affecting all four extremities) Cerebral Palsy and severe mental retardation have a lower survival rate - approximately 70% reach their 20th birthday. Respiratory illnesses such as upper airway obstruction or pneumonia due to *aspiration* (food entering the airway instead of stomach) are the most common causes of early death in these children.

The following is a list of things that you can do to help a child with Cerebral Palsy:

- Teach the child self-help skills to maximum independence
- Allow the child to complete tasks they are capable of without assistance, though it may take longer, to foster feelings of accomplishment
- Allow the child to experiment while trying to minimize his or her frustration.
- Encourage the child to be creative in problem solving.
- Never underestimate a child’s capabilities.
- Change the environment to make things easier for the child. *Ex: Consider using a straw instead of drinking from a cup*
- If the child is verbal and you feel comfortable, encourage discussions around their strengths and limitations.
- Build the child’s self-esteem.