

Cerebral Palsy

Cerebral palsy is a term that describes a variety of disorders of movement or posture. These movement problems are due to brain abnormalities that occur early in development. Cerebral palsy affects motion, muscle strength, balance, and coordination. These problems are first noted in early childhood and continue into adult life. The muscles of speech, swallowing, and breathing may be involved. Intellectual disabilities (mental retardation) and seizures can also occur, but these problems are not always present. There are about 500 000 persons who have cerebral palsy in the United States. The November 26, 2003, issue of *JAMA* includes an article about cerebral palsy.

TYPES OF CEREBRAL PALSY

- **Spastic**—muscles of the body are stiff and tight and do not allow normal movement
- **Dyskinetic**—muscles stiffen on their own to cause abnormal postures of the arms or legs; may also have writhing movements
- **Ataxic**—balance and coordination are poor

RISK FACTORS FOR DEVELOPING CEREBRAL PALSY

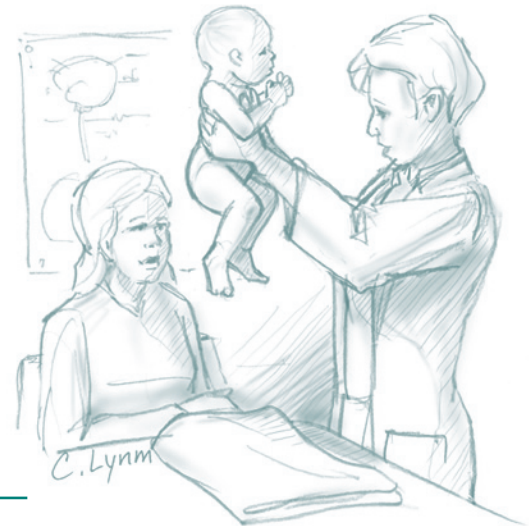
- Infection of mother during pregnancy—including rubella (German measles) and other infections in the womb
- Premature delivery of an infant—premature babies have immature brain tissue that is susceptible to injury
- Inadequate oxygen or blood flow to the brain in the mother's womb or during delivery
- Rh disease—mother and fetus have incompatible blood proteins; Rh disease can be prevented with immunization of the mother at appropriate times
- **Congenital** (birth) defects
- Head trauma (including shaken baby syndrome)
- Jaundice in the newborn baby—buildup of chemicals that may harm an infant's developing brain

DIAGNOSIS OF CEREBRAL PALSY

Babies with cerebral palsy are slow to reach their developmental milestones. They may not smile, roll over, sit up, crawl, or walk at the expected time. Doctors use physical examination, medical history of the child and the mother, simple tests, and more complex tests to diagnose cerebral palsy.

TREATING CEREBRAL PALSY

Cerebral palsy cannot be cured. However, quality of life can be improved for most children if they receive support and coordinated care, which may include a variety of experts. Different kinds of therapy (physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy) help children to maximize their potential activities at various stages of development. Coordinated treatment of disorders such as seizures and spasticity are crucial in helping children with cerebral palsy lead a healthier life. Medical research is working toward improving diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of cerebral palsy.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke
800/352-9424
www.ninds.nih.gov
- March of Dimes
800/367-6630
www.marchofdimes.com
- United Cerebral Palsy
800/872-5827
www.ucp.org

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com. Many are available in English and Spanish. A Patient Page on mental retardation was published in the September 25, 2002, issue.

Sources: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, March of Dimes, United Cerebral Palsy

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