

Understanding cerebral palsy

What is cerebral palsy?

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a physical disability that affects movement and posture. It is caused by brain injury that occurs before, during or after birth.

There are many types of cerebral palsy and symptoms vary between children with CP. Some children with CP also have learning, vision, hearing and language disorders.

CP is a permanent life-long condition, but it generally doesn't worsen over time. However, the movement problems produced by the injury can vary over time.

Symptoms

Early signs of CP usually appear before three years of age. Nowadays early diagnosis means early intervention, which helps to optimise functional outcomes in the long term. Infants with CP are frequently slow to reach developmental milestones such as learning to roll over, sit, crawl, smile or walk.

There are four basic classifications of CP based on the severity of the child's symptoms:

- Spastic (stiff, difficult movement)
- Dyskinetic or athetoid (involuntary and uncontrolled movement)
- Ataxic (poor coordination and balance)
- Mixed (combination of these types)

The severity and type of symptoms can vary significantly from person to person. One person with CP might have stiffness in one hand and find it difficult to do certain tasks, while another might have no control over their movements.

Causes

In most cases of cerebral palsy, the exact cause is unknown. Some possibilities include developmental abnormalities of the brain, brain injury to the foetus caused by low oxygen levels (asphyxia) or poor circulation, infection, and trauma.

Injury and asphyxia during labour and delivery once were thought to be common reasons for CP. However, current research suggests that CP is caused by problems that happen earlier in the pregnancy. These problems can then cause a premature or difficult birth, which is why birthing complications were initially thought to be the cause of CP.

Treatment

There is no standard therapy that works for all patients. However, there are many treatments and therapies that can help depending on the person's symptoms. For example:

- Drugs can be used to control seizures and muscle spasms
- Special braces can compensate for muscle imbalance
- Surgery, mechanical aids can help overcome impairments
- Counselling for emotional and psychological needs
- Physical, occupational, speech and behavioural therapy may be helpful.



Outlook

At this time, CP cannot be cured, but due to medical research, many patients can enjoy near-normal lives if their neurological problems are properly managed.