Cerebral palsy
Cerebral palsy refers to a range of disabilities relating to movement and posture. Cerebral palsy is not a disease and is not hereditary. It is caused by damage to the brain. Cerebral palsy may affect a person's mobility, their ability to talk, or their outward appearance. People with cerebral palsy have abilities and their goals in life are much the same as everybody else’s.

Cerebral palsy describes a range of disabilities associated with movement and posture. ‘Cerebral’ refers to the brain and ‘palsy’ means weakness or lack of muscle control. Although cerebral palsy is a permanent condition, a child with this condition can achieve greater control over movement, as they learn and practise motor skills. Cerebral palsy affects about 7,500 Victorians and more than 20,000 people Australia-wide.

How cerebral palsy affects the body

Cerebral palsy affects people in different ways – some people experience minor motor skill problems, while others may be totally physically dependent.

Cerebral palsy distorts messages from the brain to cause increased muscle tension (called hypertonus) or reduced muscle tension (called hypotonus). Sometimes this tension fluctuates, becoming more or less obvious. Messages from the brain may also be mistimed, sent to the wrong muscle, or not sent at all. This affects the timing, quality and synchronisation of messages, generally resulting in erratic movement of the muscles. Only the message path between the brain and muscles is affected, not the muscles themselves. Cerebral palsy can be categorised into four main areas, according to the parts of the body it affects:

- **Quadriplegia** – all four limbs are affected and the muscles of the face and mouth may also be affected.
- **Diplegia** – all four limbs are affected, but legs more so than arms.
- **Hemiplegia** – one side of the body is affected.
- **Paraplegia** – both legs, but neither of the arms, are affected.

Types of cerebral palsy

There are four main types of cerebral palsy:

- **Spastic cerebral palsy** – this is the most common type of cerebral palsy. Spasticity means stiffness or tightness of muscles, which is most obvious when the person tries to move.
- **Athetoid cerebral palsy** – athetosis means uncontrolled movements, which often lead to erratic movements.
- **Ataxic cerebral palsy** – this is the least common type of cerebral palsy. Ataxia means a lack of balance and coordination. It often presents as unsteady, shaky movements called tremors.
- **Mixed type cerebral palsy** – may involve a combination of types of cerebral palsy.

Other disabilities sometimes occur with cerebral palsy – hearing, sight or speech disorders, epilepsy or an intellectual disability. However, just because a person has cerebral palsy, it does not mean they will have other disabilities.

Causes of cerebral palsy

Cerebral palsy is not a disease, it is a condition. Cerebral palsy is not contagious. It is also not hereditary. It is usually the result of changes in, or injury to, the developing brain before or during birth, or sometimes in early childhood. The precise nature of the injury is not known. It is usually the result of a diminished blood supply and lack of oxygen to areas of the brain, causing damage to brain cells.

This type of brain damage may be caused by illnesses – such as rubella during pregnancy, meningitis in young children, or accidental injury to the brain.

Recent research indicates that extremely premature babies may also be at risk. The incidence of cerebral palsy appears higher in multiple births.

Signs in early childhood

These signs may indicate cerebral palsy:

- Early feeding difficulties
- Delayed development
- Poor muscle control
- Muscle spasms
- Lack of coordination.

Although the damage to the brain will not worsen, the effect on the body can become more obvious with age, and physical deformities can develop. Early intervention and treatment can reduce the severity of the effects of the disability.
Cerebral palsy may affect a person’s mobility, their ability to talk, or their outward appearance. However, like most people, someone with cerebral palsy also has abilities and goals in life that are much the same as everybody else’s.

Implications of cerebral palsy

Where speech is affected, the person with a disability will understand what is said to them, but may find it difficult to respond. Practical aids – such as communication boards and electronic devices that provide written or spoken words – help to get a message across.

Many people with cerebral palsy are unable to walk or need assistance to walk. Wheelchairs allow mobility – however, people can still be restricted by inaccessibility to trams, buses, shops and services.

Cerebral palsy may also lead to reduced control of facial muscles, which can result in uncontrolled facial expressions or drooling.

Many people with cerebral palsy can and do live independent lives in the community, and most people with cerebral palsy have the potential to participate in the same activities as others – in business, education, recreation, marriage or raising children.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Scope Tel. (03) 9843 3000
- Cerebral Palsy Support Network (CPSN) Tel. (03) 9445 7488 or 1300 277 600 (1300 CPSN 00) - for information, support and referral
- Better Start for Children with Disability Tel. 1800 242 636

Things to remember

- Cerebral palsy refers to a range of disabilities relating to movement and posture.
- Cerebral palsy is not a disease and is not hereditary. It is caused by damage to the brain.
- Cerebral palsy may affect a person's mobility, their ability to talk, or their outward appearance.
- People with cerebral palsy have abilities and their goals in life are much the same as everybody else’s.

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Neuromuscular system

The following content is displayed as Tabs. Once you have activated a link navigate to the end of the list to view its associated content. The activated link is defined as Active Tab

- Neuromuscular system explained
- Huntington's disease
- Motor neurone disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Parkinson's disease
- Spina bifida
- Other movement related conditions

Neuromuscular system explained

- Central nervous system birth defects
  Folic acid taken before conception, and during at least the first four weeks of pregnancy, can prevent around seven out of 10 cases of neural tube defects...

- Neuromuscular disorders
  The combination of the nervous system and muscles is known as the neuromuscular system...

Huntington's disease

- Huntington's disease
  The symptoms of Huntington's disease usually, but not always, first appear when the person is approaching middle age...

- Huntington's disease and diet issues
  Weight loss is often associated with Huntington's disease, but it doesn't appear to be a direct result of diet...

Motor neurone disease

- Motor neurone disease (MND)
  Motor neurone disease (MND) is also called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and Lou Gehrig's disease. MND is a rapidly progressing, neurological disease. Motor neurones are nerve cells that control...
Motor neurone disease (MND) - help with daily activities
People with motor neurone disease can keep some independence and quality of life with the right help.

Motor neurone disease (MND) - independence at home
A person with motor neurone disease may have difficulty with everyday items in their home.

Motor neurone disease (MND) - personal care
Problems using the toilet and bathroom can be stressful for both the person with motor neurone disease and their carer.

Motor neurone disease (MND) - recreation and leisure
Recreation and leisure are very important for everyone, especially for people with limited activity.

Multiple sclerosis
- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
  Multiple sclerosis is not contagious, but it is progressive and unpredictable.
- Multiple sclerosis (MS) - common problems
  Common symptoms of multiple sclerosis can be eased with medications, therapies and self-help strategies.

Parkinson's disease
- Parkinson's disease
  People with Parkinson's disease can help manage their symptoms through medication and support.
- Parkinson's disease and constipation
  Constipation is a common complication of Parkinson's disease.
- Parkinson's disease and sexual issues
  Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson's disease.

Spina bifida
- Spina bifida
  Folate can prevent up to 70 per cent of spina bifida cases if taken daily for one month before conception and during the first three months of pregnancy.
- Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)
  A child with spinal muscular atrophy type 1 rarely lives beyond three years of age.

Other movement related conditions
- Cerebral palsy
  Cerebral palsy affects people in different ways, some people experience minor motor skill problems, while others may be totally physically dependent.
- Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (CMT)
  Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease is the most common inherited disorder affecting the peripheral nervous system.
- Essential tremor
  Essential tremor causes involuntary shaking or trembling of particular parts of the body, usually the head and hands, but it is not Parkinson's disease.
- Friedreich's ataxia
  To the casual observer, a person with Friedreich ataxia may seem to be drunk.
- Helping a child with a disability with everyday activities
  If you have a child with a disability, you can help improve their communication and movement by encouraging them to take part in daily activities.
- Kennedy's disease
  Kennedy's disease is a rare inherited neuromuscular disorder that causes progressive weakening and wasting of the muscles, particularly the arms and legs.
- Muscular dystrophy
  People affected by muscular dystrophy have different degrees of independence, mobility and carer needs.
- Myasthenia gravis

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Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness.

- **Polio and post-polio syndrome**
  - Polio is a serious disease that can cause life-threatening paralysis and possibly death.

- **Restless legs syndrome (RLS)**
  - Restless legs syndrome has been described as a type of cramp, soreness or a creeping, crawling feeling.

- **Rett syndrome**
  - People with Rett syndrome have a keen desire to communicate.

**Related Information**

- **Essential tremor**
  - Essential tremor causes involuntary shaking or trembling of particular parts of the body, usually the head and hands, but it is not Parkinson's disease.

- **Tourette syndrome**
  - Milder forms of Tourette syndrome can be misdiagnosed, as it often occurs at the same time as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other disorders.

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**Related information on other websites**

- Centre for Developmental Disability Health (CDDHV)
- Cerebral Palsy Australia
- NSW Council for Intellectual Disability
- Scope - Disability Means Possibility

**Support Groups**

- Cerebral Palsy Support Network

**Content Partner**

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