

## WHAT IS CEREBRAL PALSY?

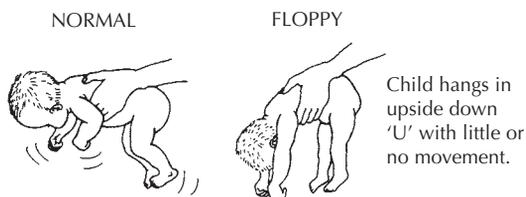
Cerebral palsy means 'brain *paralysis*'. It is a *disability* that affects movement and body position. It comes from brain damage that happened before the baby was born, at birth, or as a baby. The whole brain is not damaged, only parts of it, mainly parts that control movements. Once damaged, the parts of the brain do not recover, nor do they get worse. However, the movements, body positions, and related problems can be improved or made worse depending on how we treat the child and how damaged his or her brain happens to be. **The earlier we start, the more improvement can be made.**

In many countries cerebral palsy is the most frequent cause of physical disability. About 1 of every 300 babies is born with or develops cerebral palsy.

## How to recognize cerebral palsy

### EARLY SIGNS

- **At birth** a baby with cerebral palsy is often **limp** and **floppy**, or may even seem normal.

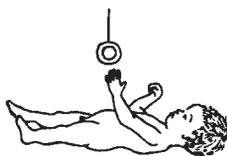


- Baby may or may not breathe right away at birth, and may turn blue and floppy. Delayed breathing is a common cause of brain damage.

- **Slow development**  
Compared to other children in the village, the child is slow to hold up his head, to sit, or to move around.



- He may not use his hands. Or he only uses one hand and does not begin to use both.



- **Feeding problems**

The baby may have difficulties with sucking, swallowing and chewing. She may choke or gag often. Even as the child gets bigger, these and other feeding problems may continue.



- **Difficulties in taking care of the baby or young child.** Her body may stiffen when she is carried, dressed, or washed, or during play. Later she may not learn to feed or dress herself, to wash, use the toilet, or to play with others. This may be due to sudden stiffening of the body, or to being so floppy she 'falls all over the place'.

**The baby may be so limp that her head seems as if it will fall off. Or she may suddenly stiffen like a board, so that no one feels able to carry or hug her.**



Body stiffens like a board.

- The baby may cry a lot and seem very fussy or 'irritable'. Or she may be very quiet (passive) and almost never cry or smile.

- **Communication difficulties** The baby may not respond or react as other babies do. This may partly be due to floppiness, stiffness, or lack of arm gestures, or control of face *muscles*. Also, the child may be slow in beginning to speak. Later some children develop unclear speech or other speaking difficulties.

Although parents find it hard to know exactly what the child wants, they gradually find ways of understanding many of his needs. At first the child cries a lot to show what he wants. Later he may point with his arm, foot or eyes.



- **Intelligence** Some children may seem dull because they are so limp and slow moving. Others move so much and awkwardly they may appear stupid. Their faces twist, or they may drool because of weak face muscles or difficulty swallowing. This can make an intelligent child appear mentally slow.

About half of the children with cerebral palsy are mentally slow, but this should not be decided too soon. The child needs to be given help and training to show what she is really like. Parents can often tell that she understands more than she can show.



With help and training, some children who have been considered mentally slow prove to be quite intelligent.

- **Hearing and sight** are sometimes affected. If this problem is not recognized, the family may think that the child lacks intelligence. Observe the child carefully and test him to find out how well he can hear and see. (See p. 450 to 453.)
- **Seizures** (epilepsy, fits, convulsions) occur in some children with cerebral palsy. (See Chapter 29.)
- **Restless behavior** Sudden changes of mood from laughing to crying, fears, fits of anger, and other difficult behavior may be present. This may partly be due to the child's frustration of not being able to do what he wants with his body. If there is too much noise and activity the child can become frightened or upset. The brain damage may also affect behavior. These children need a lot of help and patience to overcome their fears and other unusual behavior. (See Chapter 40.)
- **Sense of touch, pain, heat, cold, and body position** are not lost. However, the children may have trouble controlling movements of their bodies and trouble with **balance**. Because of their damaged brains they may have difficulty learning these things. Patient teaching with lots of repetition can help.
- **Abnormal reflexes** Babies have certain 'early reflexes' or automatic body movements that normally go away in the first weeks or months of life. In children with brain damage, they may last much longer. However, these are only important if they affect how the child moves. **'Knee jerk' and other tendon-jump reflexes are usually over-active** (jump higher than normal). If you are not sure, testing for abnormal reflexes may help you tell cerebral palsy from polio. (See p. 40.)



Even if a child can hear loud banging, he may not hear well enough to understand words.