

# Cerebral Palsy

B"H

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 of all ages in this country have cerebral palsy, and the overall incidence is rising because premature babies who once would have died are surviving. A preemie's risk of cerebral palsy is much higher than that of a full-term baby.

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 coordinated and smooth way, even though simple motions (even standing still) require a complicated interaction of muscles and nerves. Because a child who has cerebral palsy has difficulty controlling or coordinating his muscles, even these simple movements are difficult. Other problems children with cerebral palsy may develop include eating difficulties, bladder and bowel control problems, and breathing problems. Some children with cerebral palsy have learning disabilities or behavior problems, but many do not. Some children who have CP also have other medical problems, such as seizures or epilepsy, hearing impairment, and speech problems.

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 can not 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.**

Children with this form of the condition have difficulty moving or their movements are stiff. Between 70% and 80% of people with cerebral palsy have this form of the condition.

## **2. Athetoid cerebral palsy.**

Children with this type of CP have difficulty controlling movement and they may have involuntary body movements.

## **3. Ataxic cerebral palsy.**

Children with this form of CP have problems with balance, coordination, and depth perception; their movements often seem shaky.

Children can have one or more of these forms of CP. The most common mixed form of CP is a combination of the spastic and athetoid types.

Some children with cerebral palsy have only mild impairment of their motor abilities while others are severely affected. Many children with cerebral palsy have problems that are in the middle range of severity and may need ongoing therapy and 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.

## **Helping Children with Cerebral Palsy**

The following is a list of things that you can do to help a child with cerebral palsy.

- Teach the child self-help skills. Encouraging the learning of these skills will help the child achieve maximum independence
- Allow the child to complete tasks he/she is capable of without assistance (even if it takes longer). This fosters a feeling of accomplishment instead of dependence.
- 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. E.g. consider using a straw instead of drinking from a cup or try giving a child a gragger that shakes instead of one that needs to be twisted.
- If the child is verbal and you feel comfortable, encourage discussions around his or her strengths and limitations.
- Build the child's self-esteem.