

Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Diagnosis and First Steps

What is cerebral palsy (CP)?

CP means a person has permanent differences in how they move and control their muscles (motor function). The differences are caused by an injury to a child's developing brain. The brain injury can happen before, during or after birth. The injury does not change (it is non-progressive), but the effects can change over time and worsen as children grow. CP affects a child's strength, muscle tone and motor control.

You can go to The CP Foundation's website to watch a short video about CP: yourcpf.org/expert-videos/what-is-cp-2/.

What conditions happen along with CP?

There are also many related conditions that can be seen in children with CP, including difficulties with gross and fine motor skills, cognitive abilities and speech and language development. It is important to talk to your medical provider(s) about what related conditions your child may have. A diagnosis of CP does not guarantee your child will have related conditions.

Understanding how your child's CP affects their body and abilities

There are 3 main ways to classify cerebral palsy (CP): by area of the body affected (topography), by atypical body movements and postures (movement disorder) and how they use their body to get around (gross motor function or functional mobility).

It is important to know how your child's CP is classified and what other related conditions they have (if any) as it can help determine medical treatment and therapy for your child.

How is cerebral palsy (CP) diagnosed?

In some cases, your providers may suspect a diagnosis because of problems in pregnancy or at birth, e.g., pre-term birth.

There is no easy test for CP, which makes it difficult to diagnose. Doctors diagnose a child with CP by observing muscle tone and how their body moves. They also review your child's medical and developmental history and eliminate other diagnoses that could explain any differences.

When is CP diagnosed?

It is difficult for your providers to classify your child's CP in all of these areas when your child is under 2 years, because their brain is still developing. The way CP presents itself and affects your child can change as they get older. If you are hearing different things from different providers, it is important to bring this up with your providers at Seattle Children's.

To Learn More

- Cerebral Palsy Program
206-987-0199
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



Why is it important to get diagnosed and seek treatment?

CP is a lifelong condition. There is no cure, but good management and treatment can help some of the effects of CP. In general, when we find and diagnose CP, your child can get earlier, specific treatment and have improved outcomes.

My child might have CP or has just been diagnosed. Now what?

If you are concerned that your child may have CP, it is important to follow-up with your child's medical providers. Your child's medical providers (rehabilitation, neurodevelopmental, neurology and pediatrics) will provide a diagnosis, prescribe therapies and monitor your child's development, as needed. Regular follow-up ensures the right treatments at the right time.

Once your child receives a diagnosis of CP, your provider(s) will discuss medical treatment and therapy options. They may also refer you to other providers who can help.

One of the most important things you can do is to educate yourself about CP. Your providers at the Cerebral Palsy Program are here to help and can provide you with resources as you continue your lifelong journey of learning about CP.

Why is therapy important for children with CP?

If your child has a diagnosis of CP or is showing signs of delayed development, therapy (e.g., physical, occupational and speech and language) can help support your child's development.

If your child is age 0-3, early intervention provides therapy in the child's natural environment, usually where you live. Once a child turns 3 years old, therapy is available through their local school system. There are also clinics that offer private and group therapy sessions in the community. Your providers can help get your child into therapy.

Next Steps

If you are concerned that your child may have CP or if you are looking for more information or guidance on care, contact the CP Program to discuss your options.
