Cerebral palsy is a disorder of movement, muscle tone or posture that is caused by damage that occurs to the immature, developing brain, most often before birth.

Signs and symptoms appear during infancy or preschool years. In general, cerebral palsy causes impaired movement associated with abnormal reflexes, floppiness or rigidity of the limbs and trunk, abnormal posture, involuntary movements, unsteady walking, or some combination of these.

People with cerebral palsy may have problems swallowing and commonly have eye muscle imbalance, in which the eyes don't focus on the same object. People with cerebral palsy also may suffer reduced range of motion at various joints of their bodies due to muscle stiffness.

Cerebral palsy's effect on functional abilities varies greatly. Some affected people can walk while others can't. Some people show normal or near-normal intellectual capacity, but others may have intellectual disabilities. Epilepsy, blindness or deafness also may be present.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms can vary greatly. Movement and coordination problems associated with cerebral palsy may include:

* Variations in muscle tone, such as being either too stiff or too floppy
* Stiff muscles and exaggerated reflexes (spasticity)
* Stiff muscles with normal reflexes (rigidity)
* Lack of muscle coordination (ataxia)
* Tremors or involuntary movements
* Slow, writhing movements (athetosis)
* Delays in reaching motor skills milestones, such as pushing up on arms, sitting up alone or crawling
* Favoring one side of the body, such as reaching with only one hand or dragging a leg while crawling
* Difficulty walking, such as walking on toes, a crouched gait, a scissors-like gait with knees crossing, a wide gait or an asymmetrical gait
* Excessive drooling or problems with swallowing
* Difficulty with sucking or eating
* Delays in speech development or difficulty speaking
* Difficulty with precise motions, such as picking up a crayon or spoon
* Seizures

The disability associated with cerebral palsy may be limited primarily to one limb or one side of the body, or it may affect the whole body. The brain disorder causing cerebral palsy doesn't change with time, so the symptoms usually don't worsen with age. However, muscle shortening and muscle rigidity may worsen if not treated aggressively.

Brain abnormalities associated with cerebral palsy also may contribute to other neurological problems. People with cerebral palsy may also have:

* Difficulty with vision and hearing
* Intellectual disabilities
* Seizures
* Abnormal touch or pain perceptions
* Oral diseases
* Mental health (psychiatric) conditions
* Urinary incontinence