**Cerebral Palsy—Definition, Classification, Etiology and Early Diagnosis**

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**Abstract:** Cerebral palsy is a common neurodevelopmental condition encountered by pediatricians. The condition may present itself in many different clinical spectrums. The etiological and risk factors are many and an awareness of the interplay of multiple factors in the causation of CP is crucial. In many cases, the cause of Cerebral palsy may not be apparent. Cerebral palsy is invariably associated with many deficits such as mental retardation, speech and language and oromotor problems. A thorough neurodevelopmental assessment of the child with Cerebral Palsy should include evaluation of associated deficits so that a comprehensive early intervention program can be planned and executed. [Indian J Pediatr 2005; 72 (10) : 865-868] E-mail: bchrc@vsnl.com

**Key words:** Cerebral palsy; Spasticity; Hypotonia, Associated deficits; Infanib.

Cerebral palsy is a common developmental disability first described by William Little in the 1840s. The condition poses considerable diagnostic and therapeutic challenges to the physician with degree of involvement ranging from mild with minimal disability to severe, associated with several comorbid conditions. It is one of the three most common lifelong developmental disabilities, the other two being autism and mental retardation causing considerable hardship to affected individuals and their families.

**DEFINITION**

Cerebral palsy is primarily a disorder of movement and posture. It is defined as an “umbrella term covering a group of non-progressive, but often changing, motor impairment syndromes secondary to lesions or anomalies of the brain arising in the early stages of its development”. It may be stated as a static encephalopathy in which, even though the primary lesion, anomaly or injury is static, the clinical pattern of presentation may change with time due to growth and developmental plasticity and maturation of the central nervous system.

**INCIDENCE**

CP is a common problem, the worldwide incidence being 2 to 2.5 per 1000 live births. When Little first described CP, he attributed the cause of CP to birth trauma and this view has persisted for several decades. Recent advances in neonatal management and obstetric care have not shown a decline in the incidence of CP. On the contrary, with a decline in infant mortality rate, there has actually been an increase in the incidence and severity of CP. The incidence in premature babies is much higher than in term babies. For the vast majority of term infants who develop CP, birth asphyxia or obstetric complications cannot be ascribed as the cause.

**Etiology and Risk Factors for CP**

The etiology of CP is very diverse and multifactorial. The causes are congenital, genetic, inflammatory, infectious, anoxic, traumatic and metabolic. The injury to the developing brain may be prenatal, natal or postnatal. As much as 75%-80% of the cases are due to prenatal injury with less than 10% being due to significant birth trauma or asphyxia. The most important risk factor seems to be prematurity and low birth weight with risk of CP increasing with decreasing gestational age and birth weight. Cerebral palsy is seen in 10 – 18 % of babies in 500-999 grams birth weight. CP occurs more commonly in children who are born very prematurely or at term. Although term infants are at relatively low absolute risk, term births constitute the large majority of all births, as well as approximately half of all births of children with cerebral palsy. Prenatal maternal chorioamnionitis is also a significant risk factor accounting for as much as 12% of cerebral palsy in term infants and 28% in premature infants. Cystic periventricular leukomalacia (CPVL) is a risk factor with 60%-100% of patients with CPVL developing CP.

Prenatal risk factors include intrauterine infections, teratogenic exposures, placental complications, multiple births, and maternal conditions such as mental retardation, seizures, or hyperthyroidism. The incidence of CP is higher among twins and triplets than singletons. Perinatal risk factors are infections, intracranial
hemorrhage, seizures, hypoglycemia, hyperbilirubinemia, and significant birth asphyxia. Perinatal arterial ischemic stroke has been identified as another probable cause which leads to hemiplegic CP in many infants.

Postnatal causes include toxic, infectious meningitis, encephalitis, traumatic such as drowning. There is also a relation between coagulopathies causing cerebral infarction and particularly hemiplegic type of CP. Postnatal events account for 12% - 21% of CP. But in a large number of cases, the cause of CP remains unknown.

Associated Deficits are Present in a Large Majority of Cases – (75%)

Mental retardation (MR) is common in CP in up to 60% of the cases. Singh et al in a study in India report MR in 72.5% of affected children. Children with spastic quadriplegia have greater degree of cognitive impairment than children with spastic hemiplegia. Visual impairments and disorders of ocular motility are common (28%) in children with CP. There is an increased presence of strabismus, amblyopia, nystagmus, optic atrophy, and refractive errors. Children whose CP is due to periventricular leukomalacia are also more likely to have visual perceptual problems. Hearing impairment occurs in approximately 12% of children with CP. This occurs more commonly if the etiology of CP is related to very low birth weight, kernicterus, neonatal meningitis, or severe hypoxic-ischemic insults.

Epilepsy is common in children with CP. And 35% to 62% of children develop epilepsy. Children with spastic quadriplegia (50% to 94%) or hemiplegia (30%) have a higher incidence of epilepsy than patients with diplegia or ataxic CP (16 to 27%). In an Indian study, it was found that 35% had epilepsy. 66% of children with spastic hemiplegia, 43% of spastic quadriplegia and 16% of children with spastic diplegia had seizures as an associated feature.1

Speech and Language Disorders

Speech is affected in CP due to bilateral corticobulbar and oromotor dysfunctions. Both receptive and expressive language deficits are common and go hand-in-hand with mental retardation. Articulation disorders and impaired speech are present in 38% children with CP.

Oromotor problems with feeding difficulties, swallowing dysfunction and drooling are also present.10

This can result in nutritional problems affecting physical growth.11,12 Behavioral problems are also well documented. Abnormalities of proprioception and tactile sensations are common in children with CP. Psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression, conduct disorders and hyperkinesis and inattention were seen in 61% of 6-10 year-old-children with hemiplegic CP.13 The associated deficits may be more disastrous for the CP child than the motor problem.

CLASSIFICATION OF CP

The topographic classification of CP is monoplegia, hemiplegia, diplegia and quadriplegia; monoplegia and triplegia are relatively uncommon. There is a substantial overlap of the affected areas. In most studies, diplegia is the commonest form (30% – 40%), hemiplegia is 20% – 30%, and quadriplegia accounting for 10% - 15%. In an analysis of 1000 cases of CP from India, it was found that spastic quadriplegia constituted 61% of cases followed by diplegia 22%.13

Quadriplegic CP

This is the most severe form involving all four limbs, and the trunk upper limbs are more severely involved than the lower limbs, associated with acute hypoxic intrapartum asphyxia. However, this is not the only cause of spastic quadriplegia.5 Neuroimaging reveals extensive cystic degeneration of the brain – polycystic encephalomalacia and polyporencephalon MRI and a variety of developmental abnormalities such as polymicrogyria and schizencephaly. Voluntary movements are few; vasomotor changes of the extremities are common. Most children have pseudobulbar signs with difficulties in swallowing and recurrent aspiration of food material. Half the patients have optic atrophy and seizures. Intellectual impairment is severe in all cases.14

Hemiplegic CP

Spastic hemiparesis is a unilateral paralytic with upper limbs more severely affected than the lower limbs. It is seen in 56% of term infants and 17% of preterm infants. Pathogenesis is multifactorial. Voluntary movements are impaired with hand functions being most affected. Pincer grasp of the thumb, extension of the wrist and supination of the forearm are affected. In the lower limb, dorsiflexion and aversion of the foot are most impaired. There is increased flexor tone with hemiparetic posture, flexion at the elbow and wrist, knees and equines position of the foot. Palmer grasp may persist for many years. Sensory abnormalities in the affected limbs are common. Sterognosis impaired most frequently. 2 point discrimination and position sense is also defective. Seizures occur in more than 50%. Visual field defects, homonymous hemianopia, cranial nerve abnormalities most commonly facial nerve palsies are seen.14

Diplegic CP

Spastic diplegia is associated with prematurity and low birth weight. Nearly all preterm infants with spastic diplegia exhibit cystic periventricular leukomalacia on neuroimaging. Periventricular leukomalacia (PVL) is the most common ischemic brain injury in premature infants. The ischemia occurs in the border zone at the end of arterial vascular distributions. The ischemia of PVL occurs in the white matter adjacent to the lateral ventricles. The diagnostic hallmarks of PVL are periventricular echo