active disability ireland

Factsheet

Cerebral Palsy



The information is provided for guidance only, allowing you to be more informed in your approach to being a more inclusive coach. No two people are the same, as such, please ensure your first step is to speak directly to the person understand their abilities and goals and never assume.

What is Cerebral Palsy?

Cerebral palsy (CP) is a lifelong condition that affects body movement and muscle coordination.
It is caused by damage to one of the parts of the developing brain which controls and organises a person's movement and posture. The damage to the developing brain can happen before, during or after birth and is usually diagnosed before the age of three.

CP will affect a person's coordination, tone and strength of muscle action. CP is not progressive. Each individual with CP will be affected differently, and it can vary from mild to severe. For some people, CP will affect them physically, making muscle movements more difficult due to muscle tightness or spasticity and involuntary movements. People with CP may present with balance difficulties, and a disturbance in gait or mobility and have perception issues (difficulties making sense of and interpreting the messages received from the senses, moving around objects, judging size and shapes of objects etc.). Others may also be affected by epilepsy, breathing difficulties, hearing and vision impairment, a poor swallow or difficulties with speech and language.

It is often assumed that people with CP who are unable to talk, or have difficulty controlling their movements, have an intellectual disability. This is not always the case and should never be assumed. CP does not necessarily affect ntelligence, though some people might have an intellectual disability.

Forms of Cerebral Palsy (CP)

Spastic Cerebral Palsy (Most Common)

- Most common type, affecting approximately 70–80% of people with CP
- Characterised by increased muscle tone (spasticity), causing stiff and tight muscles
- Muscles may be difficult to stretch and movement can appear jerky or restricted

Impact: Affects mobility, posture, and coordination; walking may be difficult and can require aids. Fine motor tasks (e.g. writing, dressing) may also be affected

Dyskinetic (Athetoid) Cerebral Palsy

- Affects approximately 10–20% of people with CP
- Characterised by involuntary, uncontrolled movements, often slow and writhing
- Movements may increase with stress and disappear during sleep
- Can affect the face, tongue, and speech muscles

Impact: Difficulty controlling movements, posture, and speech (dysarthria); maintaining stable positions (e.g. sitting) can be challenging

Ataxic Cerebral Palsy

- Least common type, affecting about 5–10% of people with CP
- Characterised by problems with balance, coordination, and depth perception
- Movements may be shaky or unsteady

Impact: Difficulties with walking (often wide-based gait), balance, and precise movements such as writing or picking up small objects

Mixed Cerebral Palsy

- Occurs when a person has features of more than one type of CP
- Most commonly a combination of spastic and dyskinetic CP

Impact: A combination of stiffness, involuntary movements, and coordination difficulties, depending on the types involved

Supporting Participants with Cerebral Palsy in Sport and Physical Activity

- No two people with CP are the same; consider individual abilities, mobility, and goals.
- Speak with the participant to understand their strengths, support needs, and preferred adaptations.
- Cold temperatures may increase muscle stiffness for some participants.
- Use clear instructions, demonstrations, repetition, and positive reinforcement.
- Allow extra time for some participants to process information and initiate movement.
- Adapt activities, equipment, or rules to support safe and meaningful participation.
- Include appropriate warm-up, stretching, and rest breaks to manage stiffness and fatigue.
- Be aware of balance and coordination difficulties when planning drills or game play

For further information and support:

Please visit: **www.cerebralpalsyireland.ie**