

Respiratory disease concern for cerebral palsy sufferers

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Credit: Christiana Care

Cerebral palsy (CP) is the world's most common childhood disability and despite major advancements in medical science the survival rate of people with CP has not improved in the past forty years.

A Western Australian research team have recently found a link between respiratory illness and difficulties swallowing in [young people](#) with CP.

The research focussed on children and young adults with CP, at risk of being hospitalised or losing their lives, not as a direct result of CP but due to developing [respiratory diseases](#) such as pneumonia.

There are several signs that a child with CP might be at risk of developing respiratory disease.

"They include previous hospital admissions for [respiratory problems](#), frequent coughing or sounding chesty, phlegmy or wheezy, respiratory symptoms during meals, gastro-oesophageal reflux, coughing or choking on saliva, asthma, seizures, and scoliosis," lead researcher, Marie Blackmore says.

They may not be able to manage normal foods and instead have thickened drinks and modified texture foods.

If they have gastro-oesophageal reflux the stomach contents might go down the airways into the lungs.

Symptoms may present as a cough, wheeze, sneeze, choke or gurgled speech during meals because some of the food may be going into their airways.

"We think that gradually, over time, this creates an environment in the lungs that makes people with cerebral palsy susceptible to infections," Dr Blackmore says.

The researchers surveyed 551 young people with CP by either self-reporting or caregiver-reported.

Questions were asked about their [respiratory symptoms](#), such as coughing and wheezing, and about other conditions they had like scoliosis and epilepsy.

"The main finding of our research is that children and young people with CP who have difficulty swallowing are at risk of developing a serious respiratory illness that can result in hospitalization and even death," Dr Blackmore says.

If a young person with CP or their caregiver are concerned about these risk factors, or swallowing and chest symptoms, Dr Blackmore says, the best thing to do is discuss it with their therapist or medical professional.

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