



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 025 | Movement and muscle conditions

Hypotonia

What it means

Hypotonia means reduced muscle tone, or less resistance when a joint is moved passively. A child may feel unusually floppy. Tone is different from muscle strength: low tone and weakness can coexist, but they are not the same. Hypotonia is a sign that needs an explanation rather than a single diagnosis. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Possible causes include conditions affecting the brain, spinal cord, peripheral nerves, neuromuscular junction, or muscles. Genetic, metabolic, and endocrine conditions may also be involved. Some patterns are mild, while others are medically important. The timing, distribution, reflexes, and presence of weakness help guide investigation. [1,2]

General family education. A concern deserves assessment, but this guide does not diagnose a child or prescribe treatment.



Signs and everyday impact

An infant may have poor head control, an unusually floppy posture, difficulty maintaining positions, or slower movement development. Weak sucking, fatigue, reduced movement, or trouble breathing raises greater concern. Low tone may also affect posture, hand use, and speech or feeding activities. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A clinician reviews onset, birth and family history, development, growth, strength, reflexes, movement, and feeding. Testing is targeted to findings and may include genetics, blood tests, or neurological investigations. Assessment should identify whether the main problem is low tone, weakness, or both; a descriptive label should not end the evaluation. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Treatment addresses any identified cause and the child's practical needs. Physical and occupational therapy can support positioning, useful movement, and participation. Feeding, respiratory, or communication support may be required. Equipment is individualized. A generic strengthening program is not a substitute for diagnosing a potentially progressive neuromuscular condition. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Use handling, positioning, and safe play strategies demonstrated by the team. Allow rest when fatigue appears. Keep feeding observations and changes in movement for review. Do not force upright positions or use unprescribed supports that restrict breathing or movement.

When to seek help

A floppy infant with weak feeding, reduced movement, breathing difficulty, or unusual sleepiness needs urgent assessment. New or progressive weakness or skill loss requires prompt review.

Questions for your care team

- Where does the examination suggest the cause may be?
- Are feeding or breathing affected?
- Which supports are safe while investigations continue?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss hypotonia. Hypotonia means reduced muscle tone, or less resistance when a joint is moved passively. This is general education; each child needs individualized care.

Opening: Define the topic and its developmental context.

Understanding: Explain causes and signs without inviting self-diagnosis.

Assessment: Describe evaluation and distinguish screening from diagnosis.

Support: Discuss treatment, therapy, and practical family supports.

Closing: Explain urgent signs and one clear next step.

Misconception to address: Low muscle tone does not necessarily mean a child has weak muscles or a permanent disability.

Before recording: update clinical references and local service details, arrange clinical review, and use fully consented or fictional examples.

Terms in plain language

- Tone: resistance to passive movement.
- Weakness: reduced ability to generate force.
- Reflex: an automatic response examined by a clinician.

Sources and further reading

Sources accessed 3 October 2026. Numbered references support the clinical overview. Treatment availability and referral routes vary by country.

[1] Hypotonia: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia

<https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003298.htm>

[2] Spinal muscular atrophy: MedlinePlus Genetics

<https://medlineplus.gov/genetics/condition/spinal-muscular-atrophy/>

[3] Is Your Baby's Physical Development on Track?

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/baby/Pages/Is-Your-Babys-Physical-Development-on-Track.aspx>