



Empowering Children. Supporting Families. Building Brighter Futures.

Resource 026 | Movement and muscle conditions

Hypertonia

What it means

Hypertonia means increased resistance when muscles and joints are moved passively. It is a clinical sign, not a stand-alone explanation of the cause. It may include different patterns, such as spasticity, dystonia, or rigidity. Distinguishing these patterns matters because their management differs. [1]

Causes and risk factors

Hypertonia can arise from conditions affecting the brain or spinal cord, including cerebral palsy, injury, and some genetic or neurological conditions. Pain, distress, and positioning can influence apparent resistance. Increased tone does not mean a child has unusually strong muscles. [1,2]

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



Signs and everyday impact

A child may appear stiff, have difficulty changing position, show restricted movements, or struggle with dressing, hygiene, or comfortable seating. Limbs may resist movement. Patterns may change with speed, activity, emotion, or position, and may coexist with weakness or low trunk tone. [1,2]

Assessment and diagnosis

A clinician examines movement, posture, passive resistance, reflexes, pain, and developmental history. A neurological assessment helps identify the type and cause. The team evaluates functional impact and associated weakness, contracture, or orthopedic issues. Some children need targeted imaging or genetic investigations according to findings. [1,2]

Treatment and therapy

Management addresses the underlying condition and specific goals. Options may include physical or occupational therapy, positioning, orthoses, medicines, targeted injections, or selected surgery under specialist care. Treatment decisions consider benefits, side effects, weakness, pain, and whether some tone currently helps a child perform a task. [1,2,3]

Support at home

Follow demonstrated handling and stretching advice, use comfortable positioning, and report pain or skin problems. Avoid forcing a resistant joint or trying to reduce all tone without assessment. Note which activities or positions increase stiffness so the team can adapt routines.

When to seek help

Sudden stiffness with fever, altered awareness, seizures, severe pain, or breathing problems needs urgent medical evaluation. Rapidly worsening stiffness or loss of skills needs prompt review.

Questions for your care team

- What type of increased tone is present?
- Which difficulties are caused by tone, weakness, pain, or fixed restriction?
- What meaningful goal would treatment improve?



Podcast preparation

Use this outline to develop a later podcast script.

Suggested opening

Welcome to Mariel Early Intervention. Today we discuss hypertonia. Hypertonia means increased resistance when muscles and joints are 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: All increased muscle tone is not spasticity, and treatment should not be chosen from the label alone.

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

Terms in plain language

- Dystonia: involuntary muscle contractions causing abnormal postures or movements.
- Rigidity: increased resistance not defined by stretch speed.
- Contracture: a persistent limitation in joint range.

Sources and further reading

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

[1] Cerebral Palsy

https://www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/cerebral-palsy?Campaign_Content=100006380375789&linkId=100000294187174

[2] Spasticity: MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia

<https://www.medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003297.htm>

[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>