

Dystonia is a general term for a large group of movement disorders that vary in their symptoms, causes, progression, and treatments. This group of neurological conditions is generally characterized by involuntary muscle contractions that force the body into abnormal, sometimes painful, movements and positions (postures). The muscular contractions may be sustained or come and go (intermittent). Movements may be patterned and twisting, and/or in some cases shaking or quivering (tremulous) resembling a tremor. Dystonia may occur or be worsened when an individual attempts a voluntary action. There are many different causes for dystonia. Genetic as well as non-genetic factors can contribute to the development of these disorders. In some cases, the exact, underlying cause is unknown (idiopathic). The most characteristic finding associated with most forms of dystonia is twisting, repetitive movements that affect the neck, torso, limbs, eyes, face, vocal chords, and/or a combination of these muscle groups. Certain forms such as laryngeal dystonia are not associated with abnormal postures. Dystonia causes varying degrees of pain and disability that ranges from mild symptoms that come and go to severe, debilitating symptoms that can significantly affect a person's quality of life. In some cases dystonia can become progressively worse, while in others it remains unchanged or no longer worsens (plateaus). Dystonia may even spontaneously remit in rare cases. Treatment for dystonia depends upon several factors including the specific subtype present and can include medications, botulinum toxin injections, physical therapy and surgery. Dystonia can affect individuals of any age, gender, race, or ethnic background. It is estimated that as many as 300,000 people in North America may be affected by the various forms of dystonia. However, because many cases of dystonia go misdiagnosed or undiagnosed, determining the true frequency of dystonia in the general population is difficult. Focal forms of dystonia are approximately 10 times more common than generalized forms.