

Argus Orthopaedic Zone

Limping In Children

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Children can limp for a large number of problems. Almost all children limp at some time. It can be really hard to figure out since children don't give a very good medical history (especially at the doctor's office!). In fact many are completely uncooperative during the visit.

Conditions causing limping in children run the gamut from a blister on the foot to a serious hip infection. There are a bunch of conditions in between that you can imagine also.

I have found that children's history of injury is vague because they really don't often remember things like that very well. They just don't, and if a parent didn't see something happen I have little to go on.

Their response during the exam about "where does it hurt" can be vague too.

Further History

At least I can usually learn from the family when limping started and if it worsens through the day. Problems in the bones and muscles get worse the more children are active. That's why a limp from a leg or knee condition may be worse in the afternoon.

Learning to Walk

If your child is just learning to walk and you detect a limp there could be an undetected congenital problem for example in the hip. This can be very serious and must be checked as soon as possible.

When To Wait

If you are aware of an obvious cause for the limp, such as an injury during play or sports, and the child is not too uncomfortable, you can have the leg rested for a day or two to see if it goes away. If it leaves, then it's OK to continue to observe.

Call At Once

If limping is accompanied by a fever, swelling or redness at the joint, call at once. Also a bad sign is lethargy or other signs of illness. Immediate attention is necessary because these signs can point to infection and that can destroy a child's growing hip.

Infection

This is the worst problem that can occur to a child's hip. The bacteria causing the infection usually get into the blood stream from somewhere in the body. They circulate around and sometimes lodge in the hip and begin growing. Hip infection requires immediate treatment often including surgery and IV antibiotics.

Fractures

Fractures in children are always the result of injury and accompanied by severe pain. This is hard to miss.

Synovitis

Children's hips sometimes become inflamed and painful for no apparent reason. The child limps and guards the hip when I try to move it. He or she does not usually appear that ill. It may be a viral condition that may only last a day or two.

There are of course many more causes of limping in children. I have tried to give you an overview. It's always safest to have it checked if it lasts more than a day or two or even sooner if the child "looks sick".

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