

Information about Benign Limb Pains

(May also be known as Growing Pains or Idiopathic Nocturnal Pains of Childhood)

Background

Aches and pains in limbs are common in growing children. As many as one in three children complain of pains in their legs at some point during childhood.

Benign means that they are not caused by anything serious, and idiopathic means that we do not know the exact cause of these limb pains which typically occur at night (nocturnal). They mainly cause pain in the legs, but occasionally the arms may feel sore too.

Diagnosis

We can make a diagnosis by asking questions and by examining your child.

The most common age for benign limb pains is 4-8 years but may happen anytime between 2 and 12 years of age. The pain is often felt in "clusters" where the pain occurs on several nights in a row with perhaps a break for several nights or even weeks.

They may be felt more after an active or busy day; your child may fall asleep normally but wakes after a few hours with pain in their lower legs. The pain tends to move around, sometimes affecting the knees, sometimes the shins, and may affect both legs at the same time.

Typically the pain has gone by the morning and your child can then do normal activities. Your child walks and runs normally and there is no sign of joint swelling or tenderness in the limbs.

In a child with typical story of benign leg pains they do not need blood tests and X-rays.

Treatment

Once we make the diagnosis, it is important for both you and your child to understand that although the pains may seem severe and distressing, they are not harmful and will go away in time without causing any long term problems.

Sometimes massaging the limb eases the pain. Encouraging your child to stand up and walk or perform stretches also helps. We do not recommend giving Paracetamol (Calpol) every time it happens, but you can use it now and again if other things have not helped. Providing your child with reassurance is really important.

Prognosis

Growing pains virtually never become any serious form of arthritis or other disease. They may remain troublesome for a while, but they seem to disappear as mysteriously as they appear.

Additional Information

Children with a strong family history of benign limb pains, very flexible joints or low Vitamin D levels are believed to be more likely to get benign limb pains.

Children who have pain in one place, (consistently on the same side): joint swelling; a limp during the day; or difficulty in doing the same things as other children may need a medical assessment.