

# Musculoskeletal pain in children

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## Why does my child have pain?

Just like adults, kids hurt sometimes too. It is important to find out why your child hurts to help them feel better. They may need to see specialists, such as orthopedics or rheumatology.

Your child's doctor will:

- Ask about your child's health history and symptoms.
- Do a physical exam.
- Sometimes order blood tests or imaging tests, but this is not always needed.

## What can cause musculoskeletal pain?

Pain can have different causes. Two common types are inflammatory pain and non-inflammatory pain.

Inflammatory pain (like in arthritis) may often have:

- Swelling that does not go away.
- Stiffness that is worse in the morning and lasts a long time (over 1 hour).
- Pain and stiffness that improve with movement and later in the day.

Non-inflammatory pain may include:

- Little or no swelling.
- Pain that gets worse after activity and improves with rest.
- Pain that comes and goes in different spots.

## What causes non-inflammatory pain?

Common causes include:

- Overuse or strain, which may be caused by:
  - A new sport or activity the body is not yet used to.
  - Repeating the same activity or movement.
  - Using a certain muscle or a joint over and over.
  - Improper technique with exercise.
- Altered joint mechanics, such as:
  - Weak core muscles.
  - Tight muscles.
  - Joint hypermobility (very flexible joints).
  - Flat feet or very high arches.
  - Growing pains.

**In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.**

# Musculoskeletal pain in children, continued

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- Chronic pain syndromes, such as:
  - AMPS (amplified musculoskeletal pain syndrome).
  - Fibromyalgia.
  - CRPS/RSD (complex regional pain syndrome/reflex sympathetic dystrophy).

## What is the treatment for non-inflammatory pain?

Treatment depends on the cause. Your child's care team will work with you to make a plan that may include some treatments listed here.

### Movement and exercise

- Stretch tight muscles.
- Strengthen weak muscles.
- Build endurance slowly.
- Therapy with the help a physical or occupational therapist. Think of therapy like medicine; therapy works, but only if you use it.

### Activity changes

- Rest from painful overuse (but not total bed rest).
- Change sports schedule or technique.
- Learn better posture and backpack habits.

### Comfort measures

- Use cold packs, heat packs or warm baths.
- Use massage or foam rolling.
- Sometimes use pain medicine like acetaminophen (Tylenol or store brand) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil or store brand) if safe and advised.

## When should I call the doctor?

Call your child's doctor if:

- Pain is very bad and getting worse.
- There is large swelling, redness or warmth in a joint.
- Pain is worse in the morning, and stiffness lasts a long time.
- Your child limps or will not walk.
- Your child has a fever of 100.4°F or higher, weight loss or feels very sick.
- Pain wakes your child up at night over and over.
- There is weakness (not just tired but cannot lift or climb like before).
- There is a new rash, eye pain or belly pain with joint pain.

**This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.**

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