

What Is Juvenile Arthritis?

Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public

Children can get arthritis just like adults. Arthritis is caused by inflammation of the joints. It causes pain, swelling, stiffness, and loss of motion.

Juvenile arthritis is the term used to describe arthritis in children. The most common type that children get is juvenile idiopathic arthritis (idiopathic means “from unknown causes”). There are several other forms of arthritis affecting children.

Who Gets Juvenile Arthritis?

Juvenile arthritis affects children of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. About 294,000 American children under age 18 have arthritis or other rheumatic conditions.

What Causes Juvenile Arthritis?

Juvenile arthritis is usually an autoimmune disorder. As a rule, the immune system helps fight off harmful bacteria and viruses. But in an autoimmune disorder, the immune system attacks some of the body’s healthy cells and tissues. Scientists don’t know why this happens or what causes the disorder. Some think it’s a two-step process in children: something in a child’s genes (passed from parents to children) makes the child more likely to get arthritis, and something like a virus then sets off the arthritis.

What Are the Symptoms and Signs of Juvenile Arthritis?

The most common symptoms of juvenile arthritis are joint swelling, pain, and stiffness that doesn’t go away. Usually it affects the knees, hands, and feet, and it’s worse in the morning or after a nap. Other signs include:

- Limping in the morning because of a stiff knee
- Excessive clumsiness
- High fever and skin rash
- Swelling in lymph nodes in the neck and other parts of the body.

Most children with arthritis have times when the symptoms get better or go away (remission) and other times when they get worse (flare).

Arthritis in children can cause eye inflammation and growth problems. It also can cause bones and joints to grow unevenly.

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How Do Doctors Find Out if Your Child Has Juvenile Arthritis?

There is no easy way a doctor can tell if your child has juvenile arthritis. Doctors usually suspect arthritis when a child has constant joint pain or swelling, as well as skin rashes that can't be explained and a fever along with swelling of lymph nodes or inflammation in the body's organs. To be sure that it is juvenile arthritis, doctors depend on many things, which may include:

- Physical exam
- Symptoms
- Family history
- Lab tests
- X rays.

Who Treats Juvenile Arthritis?

A team approach is the best way to treat juvenile arthritis. It is best if a doctor trained to treat these types of diseases in children (a pediatric rheumatologist) manages your child's care. However, many children's doctors and "adult" rheumatologists also treat children with arthritis.

Other members of your child's health care team may include:

- Physical therapist
- Occupational therapist
- Counselor or psychologist
- Eye doctor
- Dentist and orthodontist
- Bone surgeon
- Dietitian
- Pharmacist
- Social worker
- Rheumatology nurse
- School nurse.

How Is Juvenile Arthritis Treated?

Doctors who treat arthritis in children will try to make sure your child can remain physically active. They also try to make sure your child can stay involved in social activities and have an overall good quality of life. Doctors can prescribe treatments to reduce swelling, maintain joint movement, and relieve pain. They also try to prevent, identify, and treat problems that result from the arthritis. Most children with arthritis need a blend of treatments—some treatments include drugs, and others do not.

How Can You Help Your Child Live Well With Juvenile Arthritis?

Juvenile arthritis affects the whole family. It can strain your child's ability to take part in social and after-school activities, and it can make schoolwork more difficult. Family members can help the child both physically and emotionally by doing the following:

- Get the best care possible.
- Learn as much as you can about your child's disease and its treatment.
- Consider joining a support group.
- Treat your child as normally as possible.
- Encourage exercise and physical therapy for your child.
- Work closely with your child's school.
- Talk with your child.
- Work with therapists or social workers.

Do Children With Juvenile Arthritis Have to Limit Activities?

Pain sometimes limits what children with juvenile arthritis can do. However, exercise is key to reducing the symptoms of arthritis and maintaining function and range of motion of the joints. Ask your health care provider for exercise guidelines. Most children with arthritis can take part in physical activities and certain sports when their symptoms are under control. Swimming is a good activity because it uses many joints and muscles without putting weight on the joints.

During a disease flare, your child's doctor may advise your child to limit certain activities. It will depend on the joints involved. Once the flare is over, your child can return to his or her normal activities.

What Are Researchers Trying to Learn About Juvenile Arthritis?

Scientists are looking for the possible causes of juvenile arthritis. They are studying genetic and environmental factors that they think are involved. They are also trying to improve current treatments and find new medicines that will work better with fewer side effects.

Research supported by the National Institutes of Health includes studies on:

- Preventing sleep problems in children with arthritis.
- Preventing anemia in children with chronic inflammatory diseases such as arthritis.
- Whether daily calcium supplements help increase bone mineral density in children with arthritis.
- The impact of chronic and recurrent pain on children.
- Ways to limit the impact of pain on a child's functioning.
- The role of an inflammatory chemical called interleukin-15 (IL-15).

For More Information About Juvenile Arthritis and Other Related Conditions:

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The information in this fact sheet was summarized in easy-to-read format from information in a more detailed NIAMS publication. To order the Juvenile Arthritis Q&A full-text version, please contact the NIAMS using the contact information above. To view the complete text or to order online, visit www.niams.nih.gov.

For Your Information

This publication may contain information about medications used to treat the health condition discussed here. When this publication was printed, we included the most up-to-date (accurate) information available. Occasionally, new information on medication is released.

For updates and for any questions about any medications you are taking, please contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) toll free at 888-INFO-FDA (888-463-6332) or visit its website at www.fda.gov. For additional information on specific medications, visit Drugs@FDA at www.accessdata.fda.gov/scripts/cder/drugsatfda. Drugs@FDA is a searchable catalog of FDA-approved drug products.