

Growing Pains in Children: Symptoms, Causes, and Relief



Highlights

Growing pains generally affect children between the ages of 3 to 5 years and from 8 to 11 years. Some teenagers experience growing pains.

Growing pains are generally felt in the late afternoon and evening but can also wake the child from sleep.

They are more common after lots of movement and vigorous activity.

Growing pains can be managed with comfort.

It's important to know the difference between growing pains and pain caused by injury or illness.

In This Article

What are growing pains?

What age do growing pains happen?

What are the symptoms of growing pains?

What are the differences between growing pains and an injury?

How can I help my child with growing pains?

Can I give my child pain relief for growing pains?

Can growing pains be a sign of something more serious?

When should I see a doctor about my child's growing pains?

Tools and Assistance

What are growing pains?

Growing pains is a term that describes a pattern of generalized pain in one or both legs, and sometimes the arms. This pain usually occurs in the afternoon and evening. Another term for growing pains is 'benign nocturnal limb pains' (BNLNP), especially when they are felt in the evenings or at night.

The experience of growing pains is common. Some studies have shown that up to one-third of children have growing pains at some point in their lives. However, it is not clear what growing pains are and how best to treat them.

Growing pains may be caused by an imbalance between bone length and muscle strength which happens during growth. As the child's growth evens out, growing pains tend to settle. Growing pains are not caused by bones stretching. Even during periods of rapid growth, a child's bones grow too slowly to cause pain.

What age do growing pains happen?

Generally, growing pains happen during the years between 3 and 5 and 8 and 11. Some children continue to experience growing pains into their adolescent years. This is the time when there is generally lots of movement. Most children who do lots of exercise don't get pain, though it's not uncommon for children who've been doing more exercise than usual to have muscle pain.

What are the symptoms of growing pains?

Growing pains are a type of generalized leg ache, most commonly felt in the muscles in the front of the thigh, behind the knee, and the calf. They're generally felt in the late afternoon or evening, before the child goes to bed. Sometimes, the pain can wake them up from sleep.

Growing pains may not be a daily occurrence and tend to come and go. The intermittent nature of growing pains means that they can continue for months, or sometimes years. They are more common after the child has had an active day, for example, when they've done physical activity or exercise.

What are the differences between growing pains and an injury?

Unlike the pain caused by injury or some illnesses, limbs affected by growing pains aren't sore to touch. This is why massaging can be soothing. Injuries often cause swelling, redness, or broken skin. Growing pains rely on the child's description of what they're feeling and how they're behaving. Another difference between an injury and growing pains is that moving the legs does not make the pain better or worse in growing pains, showing that the joints are not affected.

You will likely know if your child's discomfort is caused by an injury, especially if you saw them hurt themselves. It can be helpful to ask the child if they fell over, or if they ran into something. Look for bruises or any other signs that may have caused their discomfort.

How can I help my child with growing pains?

The general recommendations for managing growing pains are to help relieve the symptoms. Make sure your child is comfortable and help them not to worry. It can help to give them cuddles and reassurance and to acknowledge their discomfort.

Because growing pains aren't generally felt in the morning, reminding the child that they will feel better in the morning can also help.

You can try:

Gently massaging the area where they're feeling sore - use a massage lotion to reduce the friction of your hands on their skin

Use warmth or heat treatments such as a warm bath or heat pack

Give pain-relief medications \ (see below)

Can I give my child pain relief for growing pains?

Pain-relief medication such as paracetamol or ibuprofen are commonly recommended for growing pains. Speak with your doctor or a pharmacist if you are uncertain about the correct dose for your child's age and weight.

Can growing pains be a sign of something more serious?

Growing pains are generally diagnosed by a process of elimination. In the absence of other concerning symptoms, the reason for generalized muscle aches is often said to be growing pains. However, there can be other reasons a child feels muscle pain, including flat feet, an infection, or arthritis.

One of the main features of growing pains is that they're felt by otherwise healthy children. They are also short-lasting, generally no longer than one hour at a time.

When should I see a doctor about my child's growing pains?

Have your child reviewed by a doctor if they are experiencing any of these symptoms:

- Persistent or severe pain which is not relieved by comfort
- Any redness, swelling or pain in the morning or the day in one particular area or joint
- Pain related to an injury
- Limping or not being able to bear weight on their leg or legs
- Pain that is only affecting one leg \ (or arm\)
- A fever or generally feeling unwell
- Weakness or feeling unusually tired
- Not eating and loss of appetite

If you see your child is tripping over or their feet roll inwards, it may help to see a podiatrist.

Tools and Assistance

Here are some resources that may help you manage your child's growing pains:

Warm Baths: Bathing your child in warm water can help relax their muscles and ease the pain.

Pain Relief: Over-the-counter medications like paracetamol or ibuprofen. Always consult with your doctor or pharmacist to ensure proper dosage.

Massage Lotion: Available at pharmacies to help ease muscle discomfort with gentle massage.

Heat Pack: A warm compress or heating pad can help alleviate discomfort in the affected areas.

Podiatrist: If the pain is related to foot issues such as flat feet, seeing a podiatrist may provide relief and better management.