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Limb Pain Syndromes

Version of 2016

5. Growing Pains

5.1 What is it?

Growing pains is a benign term that refers to a characteristic pattern of pain in the limbs, which usually occurs in children between 3 and 10 years of age. It is also called "benign limb pain of childhood" or "recurrent nocturnal limb pains".

5.2. How common is it?

Growing pains is a common complaint in paediatrics. It presents with similar frequency in boys and girls, affecting 10-20% of children worldwide.

5.3 What are the main symptoms?

Pain appears mostly in the legs (shins, calves, thighs or in the back of the knees) and it is usually bilateral. It appears late in the day or at night, often awakening the child. Parents commonly report that the pain occurs after physical activity.
Pain episodes usually last 10 to 30 minutes, although it might range from minutes to hours. Intensity can be mild or very severe. Growing pains are intermittent, with pain-free intervals lasting days to months. In some cases, the pain episodes may occur daily.

5.4 How is it diagnosed?

The characteristic pain pattern, combined with the absence of

symptoms in the morning and with a normal physical examination, lead to the diagnosis. As a rule, results of laboratory studies and X-rays are always normal. However, X-rays may be required to exclude other pathologies.

5.5 How can we treat it?

Explaining the benign nature of the process reduces anxiety in the child and the family. During pain episodes, local massage, heat application and mild analgesics may help. In children with frequent episodes, an evening dose of ibuprofen may be helpful to control more severe pain episodes.

5.6 What is the prognosis?

Growing pains are not associated with any serious organic disease and usually resolve spontaneously in late childhood. In 100% of children, the pain disappears as they grow older.