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Limb Pain Syndromes

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9. Slipped Capital Femoral Epiphysis

9.1 What is it?

This condition is a displacement of the femoral head through the growth plate; the cause is unknown. The growth plate is a slice of cartilage sandwiched between bone tissues in the femoral head. It is the weakest part of the bones and allows them to grow. Once the plate is mineralized and becomes bone itself, the bones stop growing.

9.2 How common is it?

It is an uncommon disease that affects 3-10 in 100,000 children. It is more frequent in adolescents and in boys. Obesity seems to be a predisposing factor.

9.3 What are the main symptoms?

Limp and hip pain with decreased mobility of the hip are the main symptoms. Pain may be felt in the upper (two thirds) or lower (one third) thigh, and it increases with physical activity. In 15% of children, the disease affects both hips.

9.4 How is it diagnosed?

The physical examination is characteristic, with decreased hip mobility. The diagnosis is confirmed by X-rays, preferably in the axial ("frog-leg") view.

9.5 How can we treat it?

This condition is considered an orthopaedic emergency and requires surgical pinning (stabilization of the femoral head by insertion of pins to keep it in place).

9.6 What is the prognosis?

It depends on how long the femoral head has been in the slipped position before the diagnosis and on the degree of slippage. It varies from child to child.