

Health Facts

Emergency Department

Irritable hip

What is irritable hip?

Irritable hip (also commonly known as transient synovitis) is caused by inflammation of the hip joint. The hip joint is lined with a lubricated, delicate tissue known as the synovial membrane that aids movement. Irritable hip occurs when this membrane becomes swollen and inflamed.

Irritable hip is the most common cause of hip pain or limping in children aged three to eight years. Boys are two to four times more likely to suffer from irritable hip than girls.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms generally develop quickly and your child may complain of hip, knee and /or thigh pain. Usually children are able to continue to walk but will experience pain or limping. Movement of the hip and /or knee will be painful and uncomfortable.

Unexplained crying may also be present, particularly if the hip is moved, such as when a nappy is being changed. Your child may experience a mild fever but otherwise appear well.

What is the cause?

The exact cause of irritable hip is unknown. It is usually preceded by an upper respiratory tract infection such as a cold or sore throat. Occasionally it can result from an injury or an allergic hypersensitivity response.

What investigations are required?

Diagnosis of irritable hip can involve a number of tests which may include:

- Medical history and physical examination
- Blood tests – to look for possibility of joint or bone infection
- X-ray – to determine any bony abnormality
- Ultrasound – may show fluid collection in the hip joint
- Bone scan – may be required if your child is not improving

What is the treatment?

Most cases of transient synovitis resolve within one to two weeks without any medical intervention. During the painful period, resting the hip joint is essential and is advised until full range of movement of the hip is achieved.

Simple pain relief such as Ibuprofen (non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug) and Paracetamol or Painstop® Day-Time are recommended to aid recovery.

Admission to hospital is usually only required for severe cases, which may require bed rest, traction and significant amounts of pain relief.

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What to do when discharged from the emergency department

- Give regular pain medicine as per the manufacturer's instructions.
- Encourage your child to rest.
- Gradually allow your child to return to their normal activities.
- See your GP or return to hospital if concerned or if your child does not improve.

Produced by: Emergency © December 2008 CAHS 0545 Rev 2, October 2013
Child and Adolescent Health Service
Princess Margaret Hospital for Children
Roberts Road, Subiaco WA 6008 Telephone: (08) 9340 8222

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