SYMPTOM

Limping in children

Limping is an uneven way of walking caused by pain, weakness, or restricted movement.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Walking unevenly or avoiding one leg

WHERE IT IS FELT
Hip, thigh, knee, lower leg, ankle, or foot

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Minor injury, sore feet, temporary hip inflammation

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Fever, severe pain, or inability to bear weight

USUALLY LASTS
Days after minor injury; longer with other causes

SEE A DOCTOR IF
A limp lasts over 48 hours or repeatedly returns

Overview

A limp is an uneven walking pattern. A child may take shorter steps, keep weight off one leg, walk on their toes, or refuse to walk altogether. Limping is a symptom rather than a diagnosis.

The cause may be in the foot, leg, hip, or lower back. Pain can also be "referred," meaning it is felt somewhere other than where the problem starts. For example, a hip problem may be felt as thigh or knee pain.

Many limps follow a minor injury or temporary inflammation and improve with rest. However, a child who cannot put weight on the leg, has a fever, or appears seriously unwell needs prompt medical assessment.

What it may feel or look like

Young children may not be able to explain where or how they hurt. Instead, they may crawl after previously walking, ask to be carried, become upset when dressed, or resist having a leg moved.

You may notice that your child:

Check for swelling, bruising, redness, blisters, splinters, or a damaged toenail. Pain may be more noticeable after activity, first thing in the morning, or at night. These patterns can help a clinician work out the cause.

- Takes uneven or unusually short steps
- Walks on one foot's toes or keeps a heel raised
- Swings one leg outward
- Holds a hip, knee, ankle, or foot stiffly
- Avoids running, climbing stairs, or standing
- Complains of pain, weakness, or stiffness

Common causes

Common causes include small falls, twists, bruises, muscle strains, blisters, splinters, and uncomfortable footwear. An injury may not have been seen, especially in a toddler.

Temporary inflammation inside the hip joint, called transient synovitis, is another common reason for a sudden limp. It often happens during or shortly after a viral illness. A child may have pain in the hip, thigh, or knee but otherwise seem fairly well.

Less common causes include a small fracture, joint inflammation, or a problem affecting how a bone grows. Some fractures do not cause obvious swelling and may not appear on the first X-ray.

Perthes disease affects blood flow to the growing top of the thigh bone. Slipped upper femoral epiphysis happens when the growing part at the top of the thigh bone shifts; it mainly affects older children and teenagers. Both require specialist assessment.

Arthritis, differences in leg length, and conditions affecting muscles or nerves can cause a longer-lasting or recurring limp.

Urgent causes include infection in a joint or bone. These infections may cause fever, increasing pain, swelling, or refusal to stand. Rarely, persistent bone pain or limping can be linked to a blood or bone disorder.

"Growing pains" usually affect both legs in the evening or at night. They should not cause swelling or a daytime limp.

When to seek medical care

Go to an emergency department or call emergency services after a serious injury if the leg looks bent or out of place, or if the foot becomes pale, cold, numb, or difficult to move.

Arrange same-day medical assessment if your child:

Book a routine appointment if a mild limp is not clearly improving within 48 hours, keeps returning, or affects normal activities. It should also be assessed if there is ongoing morning stiffness, unexplained weight loss, repeated night pain, or pain that regularly wakes your child.

- Cannot stand or put weight on the affected leg
- Has a fever with a new limp
- Has a hot, red, or swollen joint
- Has severe or rapidly worsening pain
- Seems unusually sleepy, weak, or generally unwell
- Has an unexplained limp and is younger than three

How the cause is found

A clinician will ask when the limp began, whether there was an injury or recent illness, and when the symptoms are most noticeable. Tell them about fever, skin changes, night pain, recent infections, and any change in activity.

The examination may include watching your child walk and checking the back, hips, knees, ankles, and feet. Even if your child points to the knee, the hip will usually need checking because hip pain can be felt lower down the leg.

Tests are not always needed when there is a clear minor cause and the child is improving. Depending on the findings, testing may include X-rays, blood tests, or an ultrasound scan to look for fluid around a joint. Magnetic resonance imaging, or MRI, can provide detailed pictures of bones, joints, and soft tissues when the cause remains unclear.

An early X-ray can sometimes look normal despite a small fracture or early infection. Continued or worsening symptoms therefore need reassessment.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the limp. Do not force your child to walk through pain or try to straighten a painful joint.

For a mild limp after a small injury, allow relative rest and avoid running, jumping, or sports.

Comfortable, supportive footwear may help. A wrapped cold pack can be used for short periods on a recently bruised or swollen area.

If your child needs pain relief, follow the product label and ask a pharmacist or clinician which medicine is suitable for their age and health. Pain relief should not delay assessment when urgent signs are present.

A fracture may need a splint or cast. A bone or joint infection usually requires urgent hospital treatment with antibiotics and sometimes a procedure to remove infected fluid. Hip growth-plate problems may require surgery and the child should avoid putting weight on the leg while awaiting specialist care.

What to expect

A limp from a small bruise, blister, or strain should steadily improve over the next few days. Temporary hip inflammation often improves with rest, although follow-up is important if symptoms persist or return.

Recovery may take longer after a fracture or when the cause affects a joint, bone growth, muscles, or nerves. Your child's clinician can advise when it is safe to return to sports and full activity.

Note whether the limp is improving each day. Seek another assessment if pain worsens, fever develops, your child stops bearing weight, or improvement does not continue as expected.

Common questions

Can a child limp without reporting pain?

Yes. Young children may struggle to describe pain, while weakness, stiffness, or a difference in leg length may alter walking without obvious discomfort. A persistent painless limp still needs assessment.

Can the painful area show where the problem is?

Not always. Hip problems can cause thigh or knee pain. This is why the whole leg, hips, and sometimes the back are examined.

Should my child go to school or childcare?

A child with a mild, improving limp may attend if they can move comfortably and avoid strenuous activity. Keep them home and arrange assessment if they cannot bear weight, need frequent pain relief, have a fever, or feel unwell.

Are growing pains a likely explanation?

Growing pains do not usually cause a limp. A child with daytime limping, joint swelling, one-sided persistent pain, or reduced activity should be assessed for another cause.

Sources

- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Clinical Practice Guideline: The limping or non-weight bearing child
- NHS. Limping in children
- American College of Radiology. ACR Appropriateness Criteria: Acutely Limping Child Up To Age 5
- Sawyer JR, Kapoor M. The limping child: a systematic approach to diagnosis. American Family Physician. 2009;79(3):215-224