

Ache-y breaky legs

Growing pains got your kid in knots at bedtime? They're common, mysterious, and not actually caused by growth. Learn what's normal, what's not, and how a little TLC can turn nighttime aches into sweet dreams for the whole family.

If your little one often complains of aching legs at bedtime, you might be dealing with the very common, yet confusing, phenomenon known as growing pains. Despite the name, they're not actually caused by growth spurts. "The pain doesn't seem to stem from linear growth alone," explains Dr Wayne Hough, a paediatrician at Mediclinic Louis Leipoldt. "Rather, it's related to the dynamic changes and demands of a maturing musculoskeletal system."

Who gets growing pains – and when?

Growing pains affect around 10–30% of children, typically between the ages of three and 12. These pains usually strike in the evenings or at night and can even wake children from sleep. They tend to affect both legs and often show up in the thighs, calves, or behind the knees. "It is not consistently in the same place or even the same leg," says Dr Hough. "The pain will also be resolved without much intervention and should be gone on waking the next day."

When it's not just growing pains

Worried it might be something more serious? There are a few key warning signs to watch out for. "Should any of these signs or symptoms be present, then please do see your doctor," advises Dr Hough. These include:

- constant pain in one leg;
- pain during the day;
- fever, weight loss or unusual bruising;
- morning stiffness, joint swelling; or redness; and
- limping or difficulty walking.

These symptoms could point to conditions such as juvenile arthritis or infections and are worth investigating promptly.

Home comforts that help

For ordinary growing pains, there's plenty you can do to soothe your child at home. "Gentle massaging, heat packs, a warm bath and some stretching can be used to minimise the pains," says Dr Hough. If the pain is more intense, paracetamol or ibuprofen can help – just remember to avoid aspirin. "Topical anti-inflammatory rubs work well for some kids," he adds.

A passing phase

The good news is that growing pains are harmless and tend to come and go. "They may last for months, but typically they do not occur every day," says Dr Hough. With a bit of reassurance and some home remedies, your child will soon be back to running, jumping, and yes, growing – pain-free. ■

