



Physiotherapy

...and Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis

What do physiotherapists do for children with arthritis?

Physiotherapists are experts in the assessment of joint and muscle function. They develop exercises to help keep your child's joints moving well and maintain the strength of their muscles. They can give advice on physical activities that are appropriate for your child, give advice on splinting and protective equipment, and discuss ways to reduce stress on painful and inflamed joints.

Why is physical activity important?

Being active is important for many reasons. It can help your child's mood and confidence, and increase their independence. It keeps your child's joints flexible and their muscles strong. This is very important for maintaining mobility and it can help reduce the pain of arthritis as well. Physical activity and exercise should be a part of every day.

What activities should be encouraged?

Children with arthritis should be encouraged to participate in most activities and games with other children. They should also be encouraged to take rest periods when they feel tired or sore. The amount of activity they can tolerate may vary from day to day, along with the amount of pain and swelling that they have. When your child's arthritis is well controlled, they should be able to do normal activities and games for their age. However, it may be helpful to think about how to modify daily activities to encourage activity while protecting your child's joints.

For example:

- During long distance activities like cross country running or bushwalking, arrange for your child to take a break or have a rest if they need to.
- It may be best for your child to avoid carrying heavy weights like heavy school bags or heavy books. It is helpful to distribute weight over several joints rather than just one, for example by carrying a back pack on both shoulders. It may also be helpful to arrange for your child to have a second set of books they can leave at school.
- It can be difficult to limit the activity of young children, but it is good to know that most children will limit themselves if they are unwell or their joints are painful.

What activities are helpful during a flare up?

If your child's arthritis has flared up, activities that may be helpful for their joints are:

- swimming, especially in a heated pool
- cycling
- walking

Your physiotherapist can suggest specific activities that will suit your child.

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What activities should my child avoid during a flare up?

During a flare up it is best for your child to avoid any activity that jars or over stresses their joints, for example:

- Jumping on a mat, floor or trampoline
- Throwing and catching hard or heavy balls
- Using heavy bats in ball games
- Contact sports or competitive sports
- Repetitive activities

However, it is usually possible to modify these activities so that your child can still participate. For example, use a lighter bat and softer ball for sport.

Strategies that help manage pain from JIA

Keep your child moving:

- Everyone gets stiff when they stay in one position for too long and this is especially true for children with arthritis. Remind your child to change position frequently during quiet activities like watching television or studying. This may mean getting up and moving around 2-3 times per hour for a couple of minutes, or simply changing activities briefly.

Build in rest breaks:

- Remind your child to take regular short breaks during physical activities. This eases joint pain so that children can continue to participate. Playing until your child is worn out may cause further pain and make them too tired to attempt other activities.

Use heat or cold packs:

- Heat or cold can ease joint pain. Use a hot water bottle, or a hot or cold pack wrapped in a towel. Whether you use hot or cold will depend on which is more comfortable and effective for your child.

What are splints?

Splints are used to:

- Rest or support an inflamed, sore joint
- Stretch out a joint that is losing movement
- Help with a movement that is difficult

Children may only need splints for a short time, or not at all. Some children wear splints to school, especially for their wrists or in their shoes.

It is important not to remove splints without checking with your physiotherapist. If your child complains that a splint is rubbing or hurting, please mark the area with a pen or texta and let your physiotherapist know as soon as possible.

Questions

Please ask your physiotherapist any questions you have about your child's exercise and daily activities, they will be happy to help!

Notes
