

# Is it a rheumatic disease?

by Maria Perez, M.D.

Children are notorious for having multiple bumps and aches and pains as they grow up. When should those pains be noted as something more serious? When should a rheumatic disease be considered?

**The following checklist can be used as a referral guideline for the general practitioner's consideration.**



## 1. Where does the pain occur? Is it specifically in the joint or is it in the entire limb?

If the answer is repeatedly and specifically in the same joint, more history should follow.

## 2. How often does the joint pain occur and what is its duration during the episode?

If the answer is more frequently than a few times a month, then more history should follow. If the joint pain awakens the child from sleep and is not alleviated by over-the-counter analgesics, massage or placement of a heating pad on the area for 30 minutes or less.

The practitioner should perform plain X-ray films of the involved area and a CBC (normal lab values, neoplasm lab values), differential and platelets to evaluate for a possible neoplasm.

If the child awakens the next morning without any stiffness or joint pain, the joint or limb pain is more likely to be benign in nature and is more likely caused by "growing pains." Confirm that there was no recent significant trauma to the affected joint or a recent infection before a rheumatic disease evaluation is pursued.

## 3. Does the child have "morning" stiffness or stiffness after periods of physical inactivity?

## 4. Does the child have any systemic symptoms associated with recent onset of joint pain such as:

- Fever
- Photosensitive rash over face resembling a "butterfly" pattern across the bridge of the nose
- Weight loss
- Increased bruising, nosebleeds or gum bleeding
- Significant fatigue, resulting in skipping fun activities that the child would never want to miss
- Abdominal pain and/or blood in the stool
- Patches of flaky rash of the scalp or extensor surfaces of the extremities
- New onset of Raynaud's syndrome

If any of the above are true, please consider a referral to:

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