

Septic arthritis

Information for patients, parents and guardians

Your child has recently been diagnosed with septic arthritis and you have been given this factsheet to explain the condition and its treatment. If you have any further questions your child's healthcare team will be happy to answer them.

What is septic arthritis?

Septic arthritis is a bacterial infection in a joint. In children, the hip joint is most commonly affected, although it can occur in other joints.

Symptoms

The joint is painful to move and may be tender to touch. Your child may have a temperature and feel generally unwell. If the hip joint is affected your child may be unable to walk or put weight on their leg.

The cause of the infection

Your child may have had a recent trauma or had a previous infection such as a cold or cough. Bacteria travel through the bloodstream and enter the joint space. Pus (a fluid formed at the site of inflammation) forms, causing swelling and pain.

Testing for septic arthritis

Blood tests will confirm the diagnosis and help your child's doctor prescribe the right antibiotics to treat the infection. X-rays will help in the diagnosis and may show the extent of the infection. An MRI scan (magnetic resonance imaging - a type of scan that uses strong magnetic fields and radio waves to produce detailed images) may also be performed to help in diagnosis.

Treatment

To treat the problem and relieve the pain, an operation is performed under a general anaesthetic (medicine that makes you go to sleep) to drain the infected fluid from the joint. Your child may need an open operation (an operation where a cut or incision is made by a surgeon), to make sure the joint is completely cleaned. After the operation the affected joint needs to be rested to encourage healing. A plaster cast or skin traction may be used, depending on the joint involved. If the hip has been operated on, a hip spica (a type of plaster cast) may be applied (see separate hip spica factsheet). Antibiotic therapy (drugs that fight infection) is given through a cannula (a small, plastic tube) into a vein. Medication is given to relieve discomfort and pain.

Your child's stay in hospital

Your child may be in hospital for up to two weeks. More blood tests and regular assessment will tell us how well they are responding to the treatment.

Follow-up care

Some children are sent home from hospital with a plaster cast on, to continue resting the joint. The position and type of cast used varies - you will be shown how to care for your child's cast.

Antibiotics

At first these will be given intravenously (directly into a vein through a thin plastic tube called a cannula). The antibiotics may sting a little when being given and can sometimes cause redness. How long your child will need to receive antibiotics depends on the type of bacteria, the site of the infection and their response to the treatment. Further blood tests will be needed to check that the antibiotics are working. Once your child's temperature has returned to normal and their blood test results show the treatment is working, the option of antibiotics in syrup or tablet form may be considered. If your child requires intravenous antibiotics for longer, they may go home with a special intravenous (IV) line. This will need to be put in place under a general anaesthetic. It may be possible for them to attend a hospital near their home to receive antibiotic therapy. Your child's doctor will discuss with you when they can go home. When your child's healthcare team decide that intravenous treatment is no longer needed, your child will need to take antibiotics by mouth.

Your child will be followed-up regularly in the outpatient's clinic for a clinical check, and further x-rays will be taken to monitor growth of the joint involved.

Returning to school/activities

Your child can go back to school when they are comfortable to do so. Sports activities are restricted until your child's doctor says it is safe to do them again – ask your child's healthcare team for more information. If your child doesn't have a plaster cast, swimming is normally allowed once any wounds have healed.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact

The nurse practitioners by telephone:

Office: **023 8120 4991** or
mobile: **07584 402438** (please leave a message)

Switchboard: **023 8077 7222 bleep 2641**

Ward G3: **023 8120 6486**

Your child's GP

Useful links

NHS Choices

www.nhs.uk/conditions/septic-arthritis

If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audiotape, please telephone **023 8120 4688** for help.

www.uhs.nhs.uk/childrenshospital