“Growing Pains” and Chiropractic Care

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Thursday, 01 March 2007 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 19 March 2014 13:00

“Ouch! My legs hurt, Mommy!” Have you ever had your child wake up in the middle of the night complaining of leg pains? Do you remember having them as a child?

These are commonly referred to as “growing pains” and can be defined as recurrent leg pain in children ages 2–12 years. The term “growing pains” was first seen in medical literature in 1823. There were many different explanations for these pains. Some, such as the assertion that pains are a symptom of rheumatic fever, have been discredited.

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What are Growing Pains?

Although there are no known medical causes, theories of cause range from muscle fatigue to juvenile arthritis. According to a 1984 study, limb pain was a presenting complaint in 7% of pediatrician visits. A South Australian study published in the August 2004 issue of the Journal of Pediatrics found that approximately 36.9% of children 4–6 years of age experienced growing pains. This was nearly one third of the children in the population. These leg pains are usually brushed off as normal occurrences by medical doctors who contribute them to daily physical activity. Parents are given few to no options for treatment. Typically, massaging the legs and the use of analgesics are the only suggestions. Parents are told this is normal during the growth process and it will pass. This offers no comfort to parents who awaken to their child’s cries night after night. Should we accept this weak diagnosis of “growing pains” that affect 25%–40% of children? The answer is “NO!” Are there other options available to alleviate these leg pains? YES! Try Chiropractic!

Getting to the Cause

So, what causes these “growing pains”? From a chiropractic standpoint, we must look at the biomechanical issues. We must first understand the growth process timeline. The first five years of a child’s life is the time of greatest spinal growth. During the first year of life, the spine increases 12 cm in length and another 15 cm between 1 and 5 years of age. Between 5 and 10 years of age, the growth rate decreases to 10 cm. There is another increase at puberty between approximately 10 and 18 years of age with 20 cm of spinal grown in males and 15 cm in females. Logically, if something interferes with this growth process, there may be problems. What if a child was put into a baby walker before his/her body was ready to walk? This premature walking assistance can alter biomechanics, leading to postural abnormalities, disruption of proper locomotion skills, and also injury to the child. Other interferences of the growth process may include birth trauma, a fall, sports injuries, and overly sedentary lifestyles.

Another important point is that many of these children also have complaints of spinal pain in addition to the leg pain. There is little medical research, but, much of what there is focuses only on growing in the legs. Chiropractors look at the body as a whole and not as separate parts. Chiropractors recognize that, if there is stress in one area of the body, the rest of the body will
somehow compensate for this stress.

How Does Chiropractic Help?

Chiropractors work with the spine and nervous system. The nervous system controls every system, organ, and cell in the body. The spinal column houses the nerves, with nerve roots exiting between each spinal bone, called vertebrae. Stress overload, such as physical, emotional, or chemical stress, affects nerve system function. Causes of stress overload in the child originate from physical traumas such as the birth process, postural compensations (i.e. sedentary postures and backpack carrying compensations), and common childhood injuries.

Nerve stress can affect any system or organ of the body. The doctor of chiropractic performs a thorough exam of the child’s spine and locates areas of misalignment contributing to this nerve system stress. The specific chiropractic adjustment restores nerve system function and the child’s whole body benefits. Growing pains is one common disorder resulting from nerve system stress. The child may feel leg pain, which can range from an achy, throbbing feeling to a sharp pain.

Altered biomechanics and spinal misalignment, especially in the lower lumbar spine and pelvis, creates imbalances in the quadriceps, hamstring, and calf muscles, which may contribute to leg pain. Pelvic misalignment can lead to leg-length inequalities; the child is unevenly distributing his or her weight, placing additional stress and strain not only on the spine, but feet, ankles, and knees as well.

An article published in Dynamic Chiropractic (September 1992) revealed a strong correlation between sacroiliac subluxation, or pelvic misalignment, on the side of the leg pain. The clinical experience of this author was rapid resolution of symptoms, sometimes instantaneously, with the chiropractic adjustment. In another chiropractic publication, Conference Proceedings of the Centennial Foundation (July 1995) there was a marked reduction in their so-called “growing pains” under chiropractic manipulative therapy with respects to frequency and duration.

I can recall one of my young patients with severe leg pains. He was three years old and had leg pains both day and night. All his parents knew to do was rub his legs, with minimal relief. He
couldn’t run or play for very long without the pain returning. He also said his “butt” hurt (pointing to his lower back area) when he experienced leg pains. I found a significant spinal misalignment in his lower back area, which I adjusted. Within a week of chiropractic care, his leg and “butt” pain were practically gone! What a relief to this three-year-old boy and his parents!

An interesting fact that I learned from this patient’s mother was that his two older sisters also had a history of growing pains. Could there be a hereditary factor involved? I believe there may be a slight link, but I could not find substantiating literature. In my professional opinion, I feel the main factor is spinal misalignment, leading to imbalances and pain in the legs and lower back. Every child with growing pains whom I have seen had an obvious misalignment in their lower back and pelvis, along with leg length inequalities, and postural distortions. In speaking to chiropractors who work with children, I continue to hear success stories about their young patients with “growing pains.”

Additional Recommendations

Along with chiropractic care, I recommend supplementation to the diet, specifically a multiple vitamin and calcium/magnesium. I prefer using whole food supplements with my patients that are cold processed so the vitamin complexes are not destroyed when they are made. Catalyn® and Calcium Lactate from Standard Process are the multiple vitamin and calcium supplement of choice in my office. They are easily digestible and will supply the child with good nutritional support for the musculoskeletal system. There are other good quality supplements available. Talk with your chiropractor about what he or she recommends for your child.

Proper hydration is important to avoid muscle cramping and maintain electrolyte balance.

I suggest that the child drink half of their body weight in ounces of water per day; more if they are physically active.

Other suggestions to manage growing pains are stretching the lower back, quadriceps, and hamstrings, and balancing on a wobble board to work on stabilization of the lower back. I believe this is especially important if the child is involved with sports. If there are any muscular imbalances in the lower back, knees, or ankles, it could make the child more susceptible to
Be concerned and aware of the sources of physical stress to children’s spine. Back packs, slouching, and sitting too long are common causes of stress overload in the older child.

Great things are to be said about the effect of chiropractic care on “growing pains.” When stress is removed from the spine and nervous system, it allows the body to function at its best. Nothing is more satisfying than when I have a parent tell me their child is sleeping peacefully through the night. No longer do they have to stop playing because the pain in their legs is so severe. How wonderful it is to witness the parent and child find the cause of their problems and not merely palliate the symptoms. What more could a parent want for their child?
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