

Ten ways parents can help ease pain in children – advice from The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Canada

Parents can and should make their child's home and life as safe as possible, although minor injuries or pain in children can still occur. During a painful incident, there is more than one way you can help your child. If your child experiences a minor injury or pain, The Hospital for Sick Children offers the following advice:

1) Pain should not go untreated.

Untreated pain causes stress and can sensitize a child's pain pathways making future bouts of pain worse.

2) Assessing your child's pain is the first step to good pain management.

Ask how much it hurts (small amount, medium amount, a lot) and what the pain is on a scale from 0-10 where zero is no pain and 10 is the worse pain you can imagine.

3) Remember the three 'P's.

Depending on the cause, type, and severity of pain in your child, you can use a combination of pharmacological therapies (medication), physical and psychological techniques for pain relief. For example, it is often helpful to combine pain-relieving medication with physical strategies, such as applying heat or ice, and psychological strategies, such as distraction and controlled breathing, for pain control.

4) Prevention is better than treatment.

It is important to give pain medicines regularly to get on top of the pain and to prevent it from becoming unmanageable. There are a variety of over-the-counter medications that can be effective in treating mild to moderate pain. You should always be cautious when giving medications to children so ask your pharmacist for help in selecting a medication and how and when to give it to your child.

5) The use of cold water and ice can be very helpful in reducing pain.

Running cool water over a scrape or minor cut will not only help clean the wound, it will also cool the burning pain. A cool cloth on your child's forehead can help with a headache. Ice is immediately effective in relieving pain caused by bruising, muscle spasms and pulls, sprains, and insect stings, as it acts like a mild local anaesthetic. Alternating ice and heat can also be an effective pain relief strategy for swelling, muscle spasms, and sore joints.

6) Warm baths, warm water bottles, and heating pads can also be helpful.

Applying heat increases blood flow and can be very effective in relieving your child's stiff muscles and joints, bruising, and sprains.

7) Massage can be helpful with painful muscle spasms and pulls.

The sense of touch itself, especially a mother touching an infant in pain, is helpful in reducing a child's anxiety and pain.

8) Gentle exercise can be useful to help protect muscles from injury and encourage healing in injured areas.

A physiotherapist can provide education and instruction on the most appropriate techniques for your child.

9) Distraction is a simple and very effective way to reduce pain for infants and children.

Distraction tends to work best for mild pain and how you distract your child will depend on his or her age. Babies can be distracted with colourful mobiles and mirrors. Younger children can be distracted with blowing bubbles or party blowers, reading a favourite book, playing with a musical toy or with the use of virtual reality glasses. Older children can choose what they wish to be distracted with, a hand-held video game, for example.

10) When to seek medical advice -

This can be difficult. It is the child who feels the pain of an injury, yet it is up to the carer to determine how serious the problem is. The bottom line is that if you are worried about your child's pain, it is reasonable to seek medical attention.

For more information on treating pain in children, go to the section on pain at www.aboutkidshealth.ca , a children's health information Web site developed by The Hospital for Sick Children. Mention of this Web site does not constitute endorsement by IASP

See below for Myths vs Facts of Children's pain.

Myths vs Facts of Children's Pain

'Infants cannot feel pain' - one of many common misconceptions of pain in children according to The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Canada

Many people have misconceptions about pain in children. These myths have been pervasive and have endured, even though there is now evidence to support that they are not true. According to The Hospital for Sick Children, the most common misconceptions on pain in children include the following:

Myth: Infants cannot feel pain

Fact: Decades ago, it was thought that a newborn's nervous system had not developed enough to process pain messages and therefore could not feel pain. Surgery without anaesthetic was not uncommon and the use of pain medicine was thought unnecessary for what are now known to be painful procedures. **Today, we know that a 26-week-old fetus has a nervous system sufficiently developed to feel pain.**

Myth: Children are less sensitive to pain than adults.

Fact: **Younger children experience higher levels of pain than do older children and adults. For some, pain sensitivity seems to decrease with age**

Myth: Children get used to pain.

Fact: **The opposite is often true. For example, children exposed to repeated painful procedures often experience increased anxiety and perception of pain with repeated procedures. Children with chronic pain may also become more sensitive to pain and other sensations such as light touch, because of changes in the nervous system.**

Myth: If a child can be distracted, he is not really in pain.

Fact: **Distraction is one of the most effective ways in which people cope with pain. If someone or something can distract your child, this is not an indication that the pain is not real. While most children must be taught this coping technique, some children spontaneously use this method to focus away from their pain.**

Myth: If a child says he is in pain but does not appear to be in pain, there is no need for pain relief.

Fact: **Because children cope in different ways, their behaviour is not necessarily an indication of their pain intensity. A child who has pain may be behaving normally. For example, a school age child may spend hours playing video games as a way to distract himself from the pain rather than lying in bed.**

Myth: Children will tell you if they are in pain

Fact: **Children may not report pain due to fear or a desire to please those around them. A child who does not report pain may do so in an attempt to avoid a further painful experience, such as a needle. Older children may not wish to appear weak by showing their pain, especially in front of their peers.**

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This list (above) will be also be used in a media advisory by The Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto, Canada for the 2005 IASP Global Day against Pain.