What is Septic Arthritis?

Contact details
If you have any questions or concerns please contact:

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Revised Oct 2008 V2
Valid Until Oct 2011
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What is Septic Arthritis?
This is a bacterial infection in a joint. In children the hip is the most commonly affected joint, although it can occur elsewhere.

What are the symptoms?
The joint is painful to move and may be tender to touch. Your child may have a temperature and feel generally unwell.

How did my child get the infection?
Your child may have sustained recent trauma or had a previous infection such as a cold or cough. The bacteria travel through the bloodstream and enter the joint space. Pus forms, causing swelling and pain.

What investigations are necessary?
Blood tests will confirm the diagnosis and help the doctors to prescribe the right antibiotics to treat the infection. X-rays will help in the diagnosis and may show the extent of the infection.

Treatment
Often in children it is the hip joint, which is infected. To treat the problem and relieve the pain, an operation is performed under a general anaesthetic (the use of medicine that makes you go to sleep) to drain the infection. This may be either removing the infected fluid from the joint or may require an open operation to make sure the joint is completely cleaned.

Following the operation the affected joint needs to be rested to encourage healing. A plaster cast or skin traction may be used, depending on the area involved.

Antibiotic therapy is given through a cannula (a small plastic tube) into a vein medication is given to relieve discomfort and pain.

Can my child return to school?
Yes they can once they are comfortable. Although sports activities are restricted until the doctor says it is safe to return. Swimming however is normally allowed.

How long will my child be in hospital for?
Your child may be in hospital for up to two weeks. Further blood tests and regular assessment of your child will help to find out how well they are responding to the treatment.

What follow up care is needed?
Some children are sent home from hospital with a plaster cast to continue resting the joint. The position and type of casts vary, but you will be shown and instructed how to care for your child.

It is important that your child continues to take the prescribed antibiotics as instructed to make sure that the infection doesn’t return. This will be for a number of weeks. You will need to get more antibiotics from your GP.

Your child will be followed up in the outpatients clinic and may need a blood test the day before they attend for their appointment. You will be told if this if needed.