

Juvenile Arthritis Awareness Month

One of the most common childhood diseases in the United States is under the spotlight in July.

Juvenile Arthritis Awareness Month, dedicated to increase awareness of early signs and symptoms and to ease the focus of resources for the battle of the disease, begins today.

The campaign was initiated by the Arthritis Foundation and targets a condition that currently affects 300,000 children nationwide. And that's only the cases that are diagnosed.

"I actually think there are some (cases) that are probably missed," said Tracy Ramsey, a Family Nurse Practitioner at Lawrence County Hospital's Primary Care Clinic. "That's probably because we're dealing with people of a young age. We might assume that a kid hurt himself on the playground, and that's why there is swelling. We just kind of ignore it, write it off to a kid being clumsy."

According to the Arthritis Foundation, three classifications of juvenile arthritis exist: juvenile rheumatoid arthritis (JRA), juvenile chronic arthritis (JCA) and juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA). Of the three, juvenile rheumatoid arthritis is the most common.

Ramsey says it's a "huge problem" in the U.S.

"They can have deformities," she said. "Or they can have bone deterioration or joint deterioration as they get older if it's not treated. The damage can be pretty severe."

Because of the rainy spring in this region, Ramsey says arthritis patients have been suffering.

"The weather can have a real effect," she said. "The rainy weather we've been having lately is horrible. For anyone with arthritis, they've been having a horrible time with it."

The weather is just one factor, though.

"Stress can be a factor, as can illness," she said. "If you have an illness, just a regular cold, it can affect your arthritis. Any little thing makes it worse."

By definition, "arthritis" means joint inflammation in Latin, but juvenile arthritis can include eyes, skin and gastrointestinal tract as its affected areas. The disorder has a large variety in forms, and researchers and medical professionals are working to better understand what the key differences are and how different approaches can help.

At this moment there is no cure for juvenile arthritis. The custom approach to the disorder is to control pain levels, reduce inflammation and maintain mobility, while in more extreme cases surgery is the only possible solution to prevent further joint damage. Many treatment plans are based on proper medication, therapeutically physical activities and healthy eating. Probably the most important component of any plan is the way in which all measures are included in a child's daily schedule in order to affect the quality of life as little as possible.

Juvenile arthritis facts:

- Juvenile arthritis is an umbrella term for several different types of arthritis that can affect children under the age of 16.
- The disease affects girls more than boys. It is more likely to develop during the ages of two to four, or in preteen and teen years.
- The most common form of the disease is juvenile idiopathic arthritis. It includes a number of symptoms, such as tightening of muscle and soft tissue, systemic symptoms such as fever and rash, erosion of bone and misalignment of joints. It can also affect growth.
- For very young children, the first sign of JA may be losing a developmental milestone, such as walking.
- Only 10 percent of juvenile arthritis cases are similar to the adult disease.

- Juvenile arthritis can have serious complications, including inflammation of the eye that, if left untreated, can cause blindness.

- Early diagnosis and treatment is key to prevent growth abnormalities and allow children to reach their full potential. It leads to better outcomes and is key to prevent growth abnormalities and allow children to reach their full potential.

- Children with JA are also treated with physical therapy and occupational therapy. It is essential to keep muscles strong and joints moving to prevent disability.

- Growing up with JA can be difficult. In addition to the physical challenges, children with JA may also be bullied and have difficulty in school. In order to help kids with JA reach their full potential, it is important to treat them like any other child and for them to have responsibilities within the family.