ORTHOPAEDIC ONCOLOGY · PATIENT GUIDE

Simple Bone Cyst in a Child: Fracture Risk and Treatment

What the finding means, why the location matters and what to ask about your child's care.

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Published 3 November 2026 · Updated 3 November 2026 · Clinically reviewed 3 November 2026

https://drvishnubaburaj.com/blog/oncology/simple-bone-cyst-child-fracture-treatment/



A simple bone cyst, also called a unicameral bone cyst, is a benign, fluid-filled cavity. It can weaken the bone and cause a fracture, even though it is not cancer.[4]

For a parent, the immediate questions are often about ordinary life: school, games, another fall and whether an operation is needed. The explanation needs to cover the strength of the affected bone as well as the name of the finding.

What does the cyst mean on the X-ray?

These cysts occur mainly in children and adolescents, commonly near the upper end of the arm or thigh bone. They can thin the outer layer of bone. A child may have no symptoms until an injury leads to an X-ray.[3]

A typical cyst can often be diagnosed on an X-ray. Further tests may be used to clarify the finding and assess its size and location. Not every child needs the same combination of scans.[1]

Other bone lesions can resemble a simple cyst. If the appearance is doubtful, specialist review and sometimes a planned biopsy are needed before treatment is selected. The reassuring description applies to a correctly established diagnosis.[2]

Why can a cyst in the arm need different care from one near the hip?

Location affects the consequences of a weakened bone. Some upper-arm fractures through a cyst can be treated initially with immobilisation. A cyst near the upper end of the thigh bone raises different concerns because of weight-bearing and may need stabilisation.[2]

There are also separate questions about the fracture and the cyst. The break may unite while the cyst remains. Follow-up can therefore continue after the pain from the injury has settled.[2]

Ask what the proposed treatment is intended to achieve. Is the immediate priority the fracture, the weakened area of bone, the cyst itself, or a combination? The explanation should make clear what will be reviewed next.

When can the cyst be monitored?

Observation can be appropriate for an asymptomatic cyst when the bone is not considered at significant risk of fracture. Follow-up uses the clinical picture and X-rays to assess changes, rather than assuming that every cyst requires an operation.[3]

The observation plan should explain when review is needed, what would change treatment and whom to contact about a new problem. Earlier images can help with comparison; the team should help obtain any that are missing.

What procedures might be discussed?

One option is to drain the cyst through a needle and inject a substance intended to encourage healing. Steroid injections are among the methods used. Further injections may be considered if the cyst has not adequately healed.[1]

Curettage treats the lining of the cyst, and the cavity may be filled with bone graft or a substitute. Decompression creates a route for fluid to drain from the cyst. These methods may be combined, rather than offered as completely separate alternatives.[3]

Metal fixation may also be used to support vulnerable bone. Its purpose is mechanical support, alongside treatment of the cyst. The need depends on the location and structural assessment, particularly around the hip.[2]

The operation may have more than one purpose, so the explanation should cover each part. If an implant is planned, you also need to know whether it is expected to stay in place or be removed later.

Why might different procedures be recommended?

Comparisons of steroid and bone-marrow injections remain uncertain.[4] Evidence favouring elastic nails added to curettage and grafting comes from retrospective studies with incomplete information about cyst location and activity. It does not establish that every cyst needs a nail.[5]

More about the evidence

A Cochrane review published in 2017 found the evidence comparing steroid and bone-marrow injections too uncertain to establish their relative benefits reliably. The trial had important limitations, and outcomes such as return to normal activities were not reported.[4]

A 2025 review associated adding elastic nails to curettage and grafting with better healing and fewer further fractures, compared with curettage and grafting without nails. However, all included studies were retrospective. Details about cyst location and whether cysts were active or latent were incomplete. The findings cannot establish whether the same benefit applies at every site.[5]

School, sport and follow-up

> **Dr. Vishnu's perspective**
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> I would ask your child what they most want to get back to, rather than assume the answer from a conversation with adults alone. School and play both belong in the plan. I want the family to leave with specific guidance, any restrictions clearly explained and a review point, rather than simply being told to ‘be careful’.

The remaining cyst and the surrounding bone can be followed on X-rays. Persistent or enlarging areas and the thickness of the bone help guide further decisions. Follow-up is therefore about the condition of the bone, not simply whether the child feels better.[3]

Advice about activities should reflect the cyst's position, bone strength and fracture risk. Ask for specific guidance about school games, running, climbing and contact sport rather than assuming that being pain-free means every activity is suitable.[1]

Questions to take to the appointment

- Is the diagnosis clear from the images?
- What makes this bone vulnerable, or suitable for observation?
- What would each part of the proposed treatment achieve?
- Could repeat treatment be needed?

- Which activities are appropriate now?
- What will you look for at the next review?

Frequently Asked Questions

Is a simple bone cyst cancer?

No. A correctly diagnosed simple, or unicameral, bone cyst is benign. Its importance is usually the weakness it can cause in the affected bone. [4]

Will the cyst disappear when the fracture heals?

Not necessarily. Fracture healing and cyst resolution are different. The team may continue to monitor the cyst after the immediate injury has healed. [2]

Can my child keep playing sport?

Ask for individual advice based on the cyst's location, bone strength and fracture risk. The diagnosis alone is not enough to decide which activities are suitable. [1]

Is there one best injection for a simple bone cyst?

The comparative evidence is uncertain. A Cochrane review could not reliably establish the relative benefits of steroid and bone-marrow injections. Treatment selection needs the child's clinical assessment. [4]

> Your consultation
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> ## Review your child's bone cyst and fracture care
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> To discuss your child's simple bone cyst, any fracture care and questions about school or sport, you can book a consultation with Dr. Vishnu Baburaj at Aster MIMS Kannur.
>
> > Book a consultation Plan your visit

The evidence behind this article

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