HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONAL MEDIA RELEASE

Delayed diagnosis of juvenile arthritis causing preventable harm

-Clinicians urged to recognise signs sooner-

16 March 2025: Peak health bodies have combined to help drive earlier diagnosis of Australian children with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) who are waiting an average of 10 months for diagnosis, warning this unnecessary delay can result in irreversible joint damage, uveitis-related vision loss and lifelong disability. [1,2]

During Juvenile Arthritis Week (16–22 March 2026), the Juvenile Arthritis Foundation Australia (JAFA), the Australian Paediatric Rheumatology Group (APRG) and over 20 Australian peak health bodies and professional associations are calling on healthcare professionals to recognise the early signs of JIA sooner and refer without delay.[3]

Juvenile arthritis is one of the most common chronic childhood diseases, affecting an estimated 6,000 to 10,000 Australian children under the age of 16; a prevalence comparable to diabetes in the same age group.[4,5]

Yet early symptoms such as persistent joint swelling, pain, morning stiffness, limping, fatigue or intermittent pain are often wrongly labelled as injury or "growing pains".

Delayed diagnosis can lead to disability, joint replacement surgery in teenage years or early adulthood, as well as vision complications from undetected uveitis.[2]

JAFA's 2023 *IMPACT Study, Investigating the Mental, Physical, Social and Financial Costs of Juvenile Idiopathic Arthritis and Related Childhood Rheumatic Diseases in 0-25year olds*[1], found that:

- 80% experienced daily pain and suffer a high burden of permanent disability
- 53% had a mental health condition, such as anxiety and depression
- 46% required aids for activities of daily living
- school children missed 12% of school per child per year
- children with JIA had very poor quality of life, poorer than their counterparts with comparable chronic conditions
- the cost of government health services for JIA was over $24,000 per child per year – higher than for children with comparable diseases.

Despite advances in treatment, delayed recognition and referral remain common with many children waiting years for appropriate assessment, increasing the risk of irreversible damage.

According to Dr Jeff Chaitow, a leading paediatric rheumatologist and Chair of JAFA's Medical and Scientific Panel, earlier clinical awareness of the signs and symptoms of JIA is critical.

"I regularly see the impact of untreated inflammation, including joint and eye damage, as well as varying degrees of disability. The earlier we make the diagnosis and start treatment, the better the chance we have of controlling the disease and protecting a child's future," said Dr Chaitow.

Frontline healthcare professionals, including GPs, paediatricians, emergency physicians, physiotherapists and other allied health professionals, are often the first to assess a child with persistent joint pain, stiffness or unexplained fatigue. Recognising when symptoms are persistent, asking the right questions and initiating timely referral can dramatically alter a child's disease trajectory.

To support earlier recognition and faster referral, JAFA developed the **Early Diagnosis HCP Hub** - a free, evidence-based clinical platform designed specifically for primary care, paediatric and allied health professionals.

The Hub provides:

- red flag indicators and early symptom guidance
- structured assessment prompts
- screening recommendations, including uveitis risk considerations
- clear referral pathways to paediatric rheumatology services.

Associate Professor Ruth Colagiuri AM, JAFA's Founder, said "Kids with undetected JIA need to be heard, seen and diagnosed promptly.

"Healthcare professionals have the power to change the entire course of a child's life by identifying undiagnosed JIA early before the inflammation damages their joints and eyes. The information and resources on our Early Diagnosis HCP Hub are designed to help make it easier to recognise and refer JIA early," Professor Colagiuri said.

Healthcare professionals can access the Early Diagnosis HCP Hub at: https://jafa.org.au/hcphub/

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About Juvenile Arthritis Foundation Australia (JAFA)

The Juvenile Arthritis Foundation Australia (JAFA) is the primary organisation for children and young people with juvenile idiopathic arthritis (JIA) and childhood rheumatic diseases (CRDs). JAFA is a registered charity founded in 2019 by Associate Professor Ruth Colagiuri AM and Professor Stephen Colagiuri OA. JAFA's key focus is on political advocacy to increase access to best practice health care and medications for affected children and young people and their families, and research for better treatments and ultimately a cure.

References

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