

Knee Injury - Meniscal Cartilage Injury

What is the knee meniscus?

The menisci are thick pads of cartilage tissue within the knee which act as shock absorbers to absorb body weight and help improve smooth movement and stability of the knee. Each knee joint contains a medial and lateral meniscus (inner and outer meniscus).



What is a meniscal injury?

There are varying degrees of damage you can do to your menisci. These range from bruising them through to having large tears. Meniscal tears can occur with sport through twisting the knee whilst the foot is still in contact with the ground. However may also occur due to repeated small injuries to the cartilage or to degeneration (wear and tear) of the meniscal cartilage in older people. In severe injuries, other parts of the knee may also be damaged in addition to a meniscal tear. For example, you may also sprain or tear a ligament.

Meniscal cartilage does not heal very well once it is torn. This is mainly because it does not have a good blood supply. The outer edge of each meniscus has some blood vessels, but the area in the centre has no direct blood supply. This means that although some small outer tears may heal in time, larger tears, or a tear in the middle, tend not to heal.

What are the symptoms of a meniscal injury?

The symptoms depend on the type and position of the tear. Many people have meniscal tears without any knee symptoms, especially if they are due to wear and tear.

- Pain is often worse when straightening the leg. If the pain is mild, you may be able to continue to walk. You may have severe pain if a torn fragment of meniscus catches between the tibia and femur.
- The knee will be swollen within a day or two of the injury. Many people notice that their knee is slightly swollen for several months if the tear is due to degeneration.
- You may be unable to straighten the knee fully. In severe cases you may not be able to walk without a lot of pain. The knee may lock from time to time if the torn fragment interferes with normal knee movement. Some people notice a clicking or catching feeling when they walk.

(A locked knee means that it gets stuck when you bend it and you can't straighten it without moving the leg with your hands.)

Note: a "clicking joint" (especially without pain) does not usually mean you have a meniscal tear.

For some people, the symptoms of meniscal injury go away on their own after a few weeks. However, for most people the symptoms persist long-term, or flare up from time to time, until the tear is treated.

What is the prognosis for a meniscal tear?

If you have bruised your menisci these will heal in time and the problem should resolve completely. This may also be the case if you have a small tear. If you have a larger tear, pain that is not settling or ongoing giving way or locking of the knee it may be necessary to have an operation to trim away the torn piece of meniscus. If you follow the advice given to you by your doctor or physiotherapist after your operation it is likely that you will make a full recovery.

What is the initial treatment?

It is normal to have pain, especially soon after you have injured your knee. Initially you may need to reduce the amount of activity you do to allow the healing. **Ice** can be used (bag of frozen peas wrapped in a damp towel for 10-15mins) to help reduce the pain. If you are struggling to get your pain under control it may be necessary to contact your GP or pharmacist for further advice.

To help reduce the swelling keep your **leg elevated** above your groin when resting and using ice as above twice a day may also help.

Try to **avoid twisting movements** or activities such as walking on uneven ground as these may increase your pain and the likelihood of your knee locking or giving way.

Your knee may become stiff. Try to keep the knee moving gently and continue with **light activities** as long as they are not too painful.

Because your knee is painful and you are resting it more you may find it becomes weak. The **exercises** attached are designed to help regain your knee movement and strength.

If you do have to go for an operation it is important to do these exercises as well. They will give your knee the best chance of a good recovery once you have had your operation.