

Cartilage (meniscal) problems of the knee

The Meniscus (or cartilage) is a structure in your knee that acts as shock absorber. There is one on the inside (medial meniscus) and one on the outside (lateral meniscus). They also help to improve smooth movement and stability of the knee.

If there is a tear it can be like a flap that moves in and out and gets wedged between the bones.

How common is it?

It is a fairly common problem with knees. Meniscal tears can be acute, usually due to trauma and twisting movements. Acute tears due to trauma tend to be in people under 50 and degenerative tears in people over 50.

They can also be due to wear and tear over the years (degenerative).

What are the symptoms?

You may experience some or all of the following:

- Pain at the sides of the knee along the joint, usually at a specific point. It can be worse if you straighten the leg fully.
- Pain standing or walking, especially with changing direction and turning.
- Pain on stairs/squatting/kneeling.
- Difficulty fully straightening the knee joint.
- Mild swelling of the knee joint within a day or two of the injury.
- Clicking or giving way of the joint.

What are my treatment options?

For some people, the symptoms of meniscal injury go away on their own after around 6 weeks.

However, for some people the symptoms persist long-term or flare up from time to time.

When you first injure your knee the initial treatment should follow the PRICE guidelines.

Medication can help your symptoms.

It is very important to try and break the pain cycle and control your symptoms.

In all cases it is very important to keep the knee moving as much as possible and to keep the thigh muscles strong. If the range of movement or muscle strength becomes worse then other problems can develop, for example kneecap pain.

You can [read the PRICE Guidelines](#), and [advice about using painkillers](#), in the Musculoskeletal (MSK) Zone on NHS inform.

Exercises to do to keep your knee strong and moving

It is important to keep your quadriceps muscle as strong as possible (the front thigh muscle).

You can find some [simple exercise to get you started](#) in the MSK Zone on NHS inform.

What tests may be done?

If you see a healthcare professional they will ask you questions and carry out a clinical examination to help establish the cause of your problem.

An X-ray or MRI (Magnetic Resonance Image) scan may be offered.

Do I need Surgery?

Meniscal tears can do 1 of 3 things:

1. Heal slowly. This can take several months due to the poor blood supply they have.
2. Continue to cause problems that come then go.
3. Gradually get worse.

If the tear causes persistent troublesome symptoms then an operation may be advised.

Meniscal surgery is done using the **arthroscope**.

Further information

If you have a muscle, bone or joint problem, visit the [MSK Zone](#) on NHS inform for self-management advice and exercises to get you moving normally, and safely.