

Meniscal tears

Patient information factsheet

What is a meniscal tear?

- The meniscal cartilage (called the meniscus) is found inside your knee, between the thigh bone and the shin bone. It helps cushion and protect your knee when you move.
- The meniscal cartilage acts like a soft cushion in your knee. It helps absorb shocks when you walk, run, or jump, and it helps keep your knee steady and working well.
- A meniscal tear is a common sports injury in rugby, football and skiing.
- The meniscus gets a small tear that can tear completely or just a little.
- This can happen if you twist your knee too much or have a forceful knee movement when you put all your weight on one leg.
- Football players often twist their knee when their foot is on the ground, like when they are dribbling around another player.
- It might make your knee hurt, swell, or feel like it is stuck sometimes.
- We can tell how bad the injury is by looking at where the tear is and how big it is.
- Meniscal tears do not always happen because of a big injury.
- Sometimes, small injuries that happen again and again can cause a tear. This is more common in older people when the cartilage gets weaker.
- Meniscal cartilage does not heal very well once it is torn.
- This is mainly because it does not have a good blood supply.
- The outside edge of the meniscus has tiny blood vessels, but the middle part does not get blood directly.
- This means small tears on the outside might heal by themselves, but bigger tears or tears in the middle usually don't heal.

What are the symptoms of a damaged articular cartilage?

- This injury does not happen very often, but sometimes when your articular cartilage gets hurt, you might also damage your **meniscus** or one of your ligaments.
- The pain or swelling you experience may be more to do with injuring the ligament or **meniscus**, rather than from the damage to the articular cartilage.

- Articular cartilage does not contain any nerves or blood vessels, but you may still feel pain.
- If it is painful, the pain tends to be felt around the joint line and when moving the knee.
- 'Locking' of the knee can occur if a piece of cartilage affects the smooth movement of the knee.
- The knee may swell, and it may be painful to put weight on the affected leg.

How is a meniscal tear diagnosed?

- A Doctor or Physiotherapist will need to examine your knee.
- How you hurt your knee and the way it feels can help them decide if you have a meniscal tear.
- Cartilage does not show clearly on an X-ray, so you usually do not need one for your knee. You might need an X-ray only if the Doctor thinks you have injured your bone.
- A meniscal tear can be checked for with a magnetic resonance imaging scan (MRI).

Can I treat a knee cartilage injury myself?

For the first 48-72 hours think of:

- **PRICE** - **P**rotect, **R**est, **I**ce, **C**ompression, **E**levation
- Do no **HARM** - no **H**eat, **A**lcohol, **R**unning or **M**assage.

PRICE

- **Protect** your injured knee from further injury.
- **Rest** the knee for 48-72 hours.
- Many Doctors say you should not keep your injured knee still for too long.
- You can usually start some exercises to help your knee keep moving. Begin these when you can do them without too much pain.
- **Ice** should be applied as soon as possible after your knee injury - for 10 minutes. Less than 10 minutes has very little effect.
- Make an icepack by wrapping ice cubes in a plastic bag or towel.
- **Do not put ice directly on the skin**, as it may cause ice-burn.
- A bag of frozen peas is an alternative.
- Gently press the icepack on to your injured knee.

- The cold from the ice helps slow down blood flow to the injured ligament.
- This can help reduce pain and swelling.
- After using ice the first time, use it again for 15 minutes every two hours during the day for 2 to 3 days. Do not leave ice on while you are sleeping.
- Wearing a tubular **compression** bandage can help stop swelling and give your knee a rest.
- Mild pressure that is not uncomfortable or too tight and does not stop blood flow is ideal. Remove before going to sleep.
- Your Doctor or Physiotherapist might tell you to stop using the bandage after 2 days.
- This is because the bandage may limit movement of the joint which should normally be moving more freely after this time.
- This is because the bandage can stop your knee from moving freely. After 2 days your knee should be moving freely on its own.
- Sometimes bandages on the knee are kept on for longer. This is to help keep the swelling down and to keep the knee more comfortable. Ask your Doctor or Physiotherapist health professional what is best in your case.
- **Elevation** means raising your knee to help stop and reduce swelling. For example, lie on a sofa and put your foot on some cushions. Your hurt knee should be higher than your heart.

R is sometimes added to this list to make PRICER.

- R stands for **Rehabilitation**.
- This is the most important part of the treatment for meniscal tears - to get you and your knee back to normal.
- You may need to see a Physiotherapist or sports therapist for advice about exercises.
- These can strengthen and stretch the muscles around your knee if your symptoms continue longer than they should.

Do not do any of the following for 72 hours after your injury.

Avoid HARM:

- **Heat** - for example, hot baths, saunas, heat packs.
- Heat does the opposite of ice—it makes more blood flow to the area. So, you should not use heat when your knee is swollen or inflamed.
- After about 3 days, the swelling usually goes down, and then using heat can feel good and help your knee feel better.

- Do not drink any **alcohol**. It can make bleeding and swelling worse and slow down healing.
- Do not go **running** or do any other form of exercise which might cause more damage.
- Do not **massage** the injury. This can increase bleeding and swelling.
- After about three days, when the swelling has gone down, a gentle massage might feel good.

What medication will help?

You can take medicine to help with pain and swelling. Ask your Doctor or Pharmacist for help.

Further support

This will then depend on:

- How much pain and swelling you have
- How your symptoms are affecting your life
- Your age
- Your general health
- When will you need physiotherapy for a meniscal tear and why?

How long will the tear take to heal?

- Small tears may heal by themselves and take about six weeks.
- You might be told to see a Physiotherapist who can help you make the muscles around your knee stronger, like your thigh muscles.
- Some tears never heal but that does not mean you will always be in pain.
- After the first pain and swelling go away it might not come back for a long time.
- Sometimes, the tears only cause little or occasional problems. In these cases, you do not need more treatment.
- If your knee problems make it hard for you to work or last more than 8 weeks, even after doing exercises with a Physiotherapist, your Doctor might send you to see an orthopaedic surgeon (a specialist bone and joint Doctor).
- It is important to realise that if you have been diagnosed with a meniscal tear, and it has shown up on an MRI scan, this does not mean you will have to have surgery.

- If you do need surgery to your knee, you will be told to have physiotherapy afterwards. This is to keep the knee joint active and to strengthen the surrounding muscles to give support and strength to the knee.

Exercises

Knee flexion using towel or plastic bag



- Lie on your back with your legs straight.
- Put a towel/plastic bag under the heel of the affected leg.
- Slide your heel on the bed towards your buttock to bend the knee as far as you can.
- Maintain the position.
- Lower your leg slowly and repeat. When you perform this movement, keep your knee straight. Do not allow it to move in or out.

Straight leg raises



- Lie on your back with one knee bent and the affected leg completely straight.
- Lift your leg off the bed to 45 degrees, keeping it straight.
- Lower the leg to the starting position and repeat.

Knee extension



- Sit down on a chair with your back straight.
- Fully extend one leg then go down and repeat.

Wall sit



- Squat down against a wall, stopping the motion when your knees are bent 70°.
- Keep your back flat against the wall and hold the position for as long as you can, come back up and repeat 3 to 5 times.

References

<https://patient.info/bones-joints-muscles/sports-injuries/meniscal-tears-knee-cartilage-injuries>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/meniscus-tear/>

Contact our service

MSK CATS and Physiotherapy Services

Tel.: 0207 288 3317 Email: whh-tr.mskinterfaceservice@nhs.net

Contact our Trust

If you have a compliment, complaint or concern, please contact our Patient advice and liaison service (PALS) on **020 7288 5551** or whh-tr.PALS@nhs.net.

If you need a large print, audio or translated copy of this leaflet, please email whh-tr.patient-information@nhs.net. We will try our best to meet your needs.

020 7272 3070 | Whittington Health NHS Trust, Magdala Avenue, London, N19 5NF
www.whittington.nhs.uk | x.com/WhitHealth | facebook.com/WhittingtonHealth

Document information

Date published: 28/10/2025 | Review date: 28/10/2027 | Ref: ACS/MSKCATS/MenT/01
© Whittington Health NHS Trust. Please recycle.