

What Are Knee Problems?

Fast Facts: An Easy-to-Read Series of Publications for the Public

What Do the Knees Do?

The knees provide stable support for the body. They also allow the legs to bend and straighten. Both flexibility and stability are needed to stand, walk, run, crouch, jump, and turn. Other parts of the body help the knees do their job. These are:

- Bones
- Cartilage
- Muscles
- Ligaments
- Tendons.

If any of these parts are injured, the knee may hurt and not be able to do its job.

Who Gets Knee Problems?

Men, women, and children can have knee problems. They occur in people of all races and ethnic backgrounds.

What Causes Knee Problems?

Mechanical knee problems can be caused by:

- A direct blow or sudden movements that strain the knee
- Osteoarthritis in the knee, resulting from wear and tear on its parts.

Inflammatory knee problems can be caused by certain rheumatic diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis and systemic lupus erythematosus (lupus). These diseases cause swelling that can damage the knees permanently.

How Are Knee Problems Diagnosed?

Doctors diagnose knee problems by using:

- Medical history
- Physical examination
- Diagnostic tests (such as x rays, bone scan, CAT scan, MRI, arthroscopy, and biopsy).

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Arthritis in the Knees

The most common type of arthritis of the knee is osteoarthritis. In this disease, the cartilage in the knee gradually wears away. Treatments for osteoarthritis are:

- Medicines to reduce pain, such as aspirin and acetaminophen
- Medicines to reduce swelling and inflammation, such as ibuprofen and nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs)
- Exercises to improve movement and strength
- Weight loss.

Rheumatoid arthritis is another type of arthritis that affects the knee. In rheumatoid arthritis, the knee becomes inflamed and cartilage may be destroyed. Treatment includes:

- Physical therapy
- Medications
- Knee replacement surgery (for a seriously damaged knee).

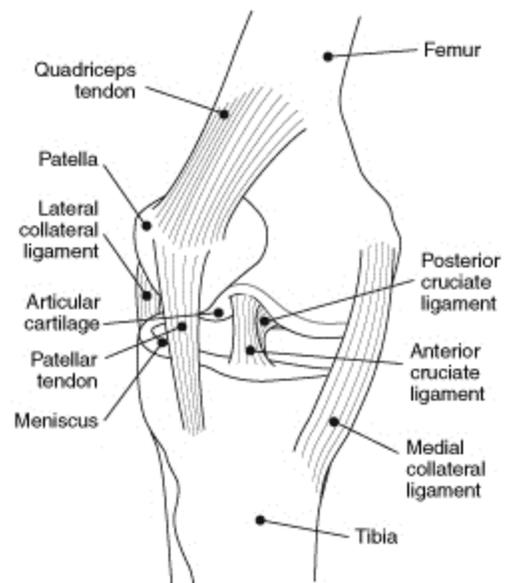
Cartilage Injuries and Disorders

Chondromalacia (KON-dro-muh-lay-she-uh) occurs when the cartilage of the knee cap softens. This can be caused by injury, overuse, or muscle weakness, or if parts of the knee are out of alignment. Chondromalacia can develop if a blow to the knee cap tears off a piece of cartilage or a piece of cartilage containing a bone fragment.

The meniscus (meh-NISS-kus) is a C-shaped piece of cartilage that acts like a pad between the femur (thigh bone) and tibia (shin bone). It is easily injured if the knee is twisted while bearing weight. A partial or total tear may occur. If the tear is tiny, the meniscus stays connected to the front and back of the knee. If the tear is large, the meniscus may be left hanging by a thread of cartilage. The seriousness of the injury depends on the location and the size of the tear.

Treatment for cartilage injuries includes:

- Exercises to strengthen muscles
- Electrical stimulation to strengthen muscles
- Surgery for severe injuries.



Lateral View of the Knee

Ligament Injuries

Two commonly injured ligaments in the knee are the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) and the posterior cruciate ligament (PCL). An injury to these ligaments is sometimes called a "sprain." The ACL is most often stretched or torn (or both) by a sudden twisting motion. The PCL is usually injured by a direct impact, such as in an automobile accident or football tackle.

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