

# Knee Pain

Knee pain affects most people at some point in their lives. It is usually associated with common activities of daily living including walking, stair climbing, rising from sitting and squatting. While the pain may be considerable and may limit your lifestyle, there are many things that can be done to alleviate knee

pain. Importantly, you can do a great deal to help yourself.

This leaflet will provide you with some information about common causes of knee pain. It will outline the best treatment options; specifically physiotherapy, exercise and self help advice.

## Common causes of knee pain

The most common cause of knee pain in younger adults is patellofemoral pain syndrome. This condition is sometimes known as chondromalacia patella.

In older adults, the most common cause of knee pain is arthritis. The most common type of arthritis affecting the knee is osteoarthritis.

Injury can also cause damage to the tissues inside and around a knee joint; recent trauma is not covered in this leaflet.

### Patellofemoral pain syndrome

(Pain originating from the back of the knee cap)

- Patellofemoral pain syndrome is the most common cause of pain in adolescents and young adults
- Many factors, including the shape and size of the knee cap, muscle strength, flexibility and co-ordination are thought to contribute to patellofemoral pain syndrome
- Patellofemoral pain syndrome does not always resolve without treatment, nor does it mean that you will develop osteoarthritis in later life.

### Osteoarthritis

- Osteoarthritis affects approximately 1 in 4 adults
- Osteoarthritis occurs when the bones and the cartilage that make up the knee joint become damaged
- In most cases, the cause of the damage is unknown. In some cases it can result from previous injury, being overweight or from family history
- Osteoarthritis is not an unavoidable consequence of aging. Early detection and diagnosis are crucial in managing the condition
- Just because you have knee osteoarthritis, you will not necessarily develop problems in other joints.

## Common problems associated with knee pain

Knee pain can be associated with a range of symptoms that may vary from person to person. The most common problems encountered are:

- Pain
- Tenderness
- Stiffness of the knee joint, including early morning stiffness
- Swelling of the knee, caused by inflammation
- Muscle weakness, which causes the knee to feel unstable
- Grinding or cracking within the joint
- Loss of mobility
- Difficulty participating in sporting and other physical activities.

It is common for x-rays or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) to be performed to help diagnose knee pain. They can be helpful in diagnosing osteoarthritis. However it is important to remember that changes on x-ray do not accurately predict symptoms or what treatment will be best for your knee. For example, many people with x-ray results showing osteoarthritis will never require knee surgery and can be helped with simple treatment strategies.

## Management of knee pain

Many different types of treatment are available to address the symptoms and underlying causes associated with your knee pain. Typical treatment options may include:

- Physiotherapy (individualised or group)
- Podiatry
- Over the counter medication can help. If your pain is well controlled this will allow you to exercise the joint. Consult your pharmacist or GP for advice on medication.
- Complementary medicines such as acupuncture or health supplements
- Most people do not require surgery, it may be considered if the previous options have had no success.

### **How physiotherapy can help**

Physiotherapists are skilled in the prescription of exercise. They will provide you with specific exercises to improve your strength, flexibility, balance and posture as indicated by a thorough examination. Therefore, your programme will be individualised to ensure the best possible outcome for your knee.

Physiotherapists also use other treatment techniques for knee pain. These may include:

- Joint mobilising and soft tissue massage
- Heat or cold treatment
- Electrical stimulation
- Knee taping or bracing
- Advice and education about how best to manage your condition
- Facilitation of return to sport and other functional activities.

Physiotherapists are experts in rehabilitation.

## Exercise and why it is important

Everyone benefits from regular exercise. Regular exercise is important in maintaining overall health and for preventing chronic conditions such as diabetes and obesity. For people with knee pain, exercise is particularly important. Even low-level exercise performed at home can help to maintain joint mobility and health. In fact, research has shown that regular exercise is one of the most important treatments for most knee pain.

Benefits of exercise for people with knee pain:

- Helps decrease pain in the knee
- Strengthens weakened muscles that may contribute to knee pain and problems with physical function in the first place
- Maintains and improves joint and muscle flexibility. This can prevent or reduce feelings of stiffness
- Improves posture and balance
- Reduces depression and stress levels
- Increases independence in physical activities
- Improves sporting performance
- Controls weight and reduces body fat which helps to reduce the load on the knee joint.

There are many types of exercise that can benefit people with knee pain including hydrotherapy, gym-based programmes, walking and cycling. Your Physiotherapist will help determine the most appropriate exercise programme for you.

Everyone benefits from regular exercise.

## Managing your pain

Sometimes physiotherapy, medicines and other treatments may not relieve all of your knee pain.

However there are many things you can do to manage your pain. These include:

- Take your medications as prescribed by your Doctor or advised by the Pharmacist
- Do your exercises as prescribed by the Physiotherapist
- Use heat or cold treatments to assist with flare ups of your pain. Heat may be provided by warm baths or heat packs. Ice packs may be used to reduce episodes of swelling in addition to pain. Ask your Physiotherapist which type of treatment is best for your knee
- Ensure your weight is within the health range. Being overweight places extra stress on the knee joint and contributes to knee pain. Regular exercise and a healthy diet are important
- Stay positive and try not to focus on your knee pain. Even though you may have chronic knee pain, it should not stop you from participating in the things you enjoy. Your Physiotherapist can advise you how to modify your activities in order to maximise participation
- Relaxation is important in lowering stress levels, reducing muscle tension and improving your overall sense of well being.

## What you 'kneed' to remember about knee pain

- Knee pain affects most people and is rarely caused by anything serious
- Pain is individual and what works for your friend may not work for you. You may need to try a range of treatments to find the one that works best for you
- A combination of treatments from your doctor and Physiotherapist will usually result in the best outcome
- An exercise programme tailored to your specific needs is important and can be provided by your Physiotherapist
- Accept the advice and reassurance you are given by health professionals
- Stay active and eat healthily
- Take responsibility for your pain and stay positive.

If you need a little extra help, speak to your Physiotherapist or GP.

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