



KNEE PAIN

Thomas Driscoll, PT, DPT

Knee pain affects approximately 25% of adults, and can impact anywhere from about 10-25% of children and adolescents. The knee is the most commonly injured joint in children and adolescents, namely with sports participation.

Just what is the knee joint? It primarily consists of three bones: the patella (kneecap), femur (thigh bone), and tibia (shin bone). There is also the fibula, which is the bony landmark on the outside of your lower leg. Between each of these bones lies fluid and cartilage, allowing for shock absorption and the bones to glide smoothly over one another. To provide further structural stability, there are ligaments that prevent your knee from shifting out of place and twisting too much. There are four – to prevent shifting forwards, backwards, and to both sides. On top of this, there are numerous muscles that we use in our everyday lives that help to absorb the forces going through the joint.

Where does knee pain stem from? The broad answer is almost anything – a torn ligament during an athletic event, a muscle strain while working out, cartilage breakdown within the knee, and natural arthritic changes within the body. Clinicians could spend hours talking about the wide variety of injuries and the corresponding signs and symptoms for each. Some injuries will often accompany others. The point is, until an examination is performed, you are likely guessing and checking to find the exact culprit.

With every single step we take, there is some wear and tear on our knee joints because they must bear weight and support the remainder of our bodies. We are fighting gravity and absorbing forces from the ground as we go about our day-to-day activities. If the knee cannot do this, we would be flat on the floor much more frequently than any of us would like.

This is not me saying you should limit your walking or exercise. In fact, it is the exact opposite. Strong muscles, namely in your hip, thigh, and lower legs, are responsible for absorbing forces from walking, running, and stair climbing. As we go about the aging process, our muscles will naturally shrink in size, resulting in a loss of strength. When these muscles cannot perform optimally, the force must then be absorbed by the cartilage and bones themselves within the knee joint, leading to feelings of pain and discomfort. No high-tech equipment or gym membership is required – simply performing bodyweight exercises or going for a walk everyday can be very effective in preventing muscle decline.

People will often ask about exercise prescription or inquire about the “best exercises” one can do to prevent future injuries and/or pain. My best answer is this: any hip/knee/ankle/core strengthening exercises are great, as long as they do not cause pain. Weight bearing exercises that challenge our muscles and tire them out are proven to be most effective. Muscle fatigue and soreness for a couple of days after a workout is normal, but pain while doing something is not. Listen to your body and do not be afraid to take a step back or day off if pain is persisting.

When pain does persist, do not wait and assume that things will simply get better. The human body has a remarkable way of maintaining a proper balance within itself and healing injuries as they come and go. With this in mind, the fact that an ache or pain will not disappear should be an alert to have your knee examined. Any primary doctor, orthopedic doctor, or physical therapist is fully qualified to perform an examination and determine the appropriate course of action, referring to other specialties as needed. Do not be afraid to reach out – so often people will wait several months before addressing a knee problem and it will take that much longer for it to heal. Early detection is key when it comes to addressing knee pain!

