Knee injuries

This fact sheet is for people who have presented to the emergency department with this condition.

This fact sheet provides general information. If you have specific concerns, speak to your healthcare professional for further information and advice.

What is a knee injury?

The knee has many soft tissues and ligaments within and around the joint (see image below). If the knee is subjected to abnormal forces such as twisting actions or bending sideways, these tissues may be damaged, causing a sprain or tear. This can lead to pain and swelling of the knee.

Your knee will usually require re-examination by your local doctor or a physiotherapist once the pain has settled, to ensure no potential major ligament injury exists.

Treatment

First aid for knee injuries (first 48-72 hours)

- **Rest**: avoid activities that cause pain. If you are unable to put weight on your leg comfortably, use crutches as needed.
- **Ice:** apply to your knee intermittently for no longer than 20 minutes at a time. Use a damp cloth layer, such as a towel, between the ice and your skin. Commercially available ice packs work best as they mold to your skin.
- **Compression:** a compression bandage or stocking during the day may help with discomfort.
- **Elevation:** when resting, raise your leg (with pillows) above the level of your heart to minimise swelling.

Tips to help your recovery

- Use walking aids or crutches as directed to increase the weight you are putting through your knee gradually each day.
- Wear any prescribed braces or splints as directed. Only remove them to attend to personal hygiene.
- Take pain medication as instructed by your emergency department doctor and continue to speak with your local doctor or pharmacist about maintaining your pain relief if needed.
- Avoid ‘HARM’ (heat, alcohol, running/sport and massage).

Exercises

Knee flexion and extension (10 times, three times a day)

Try knee flexion and extension – gently bend and straighten your affected knee. Do 10 times, three times a day.

Ankle maintenance (three times a day)

Ankle maintenance – using your ankle and foot only, trace the letters of the alphabet. Trace A to Z. Do this at least three times a day.

Quads strengthening (10 times, three times a day)

Quads strengthening – tighten the muscles on the top of your knees by pushing the back of your knees down into the bed:

- Your heel should lift off the bed
- Any braces can stay on
- Hold 10 seconds
- Do 10 times, three times a day

Weight bearing exercises (10 times, three times a day)

Attempt these as your pain permits, about a week after your injury.

Rise up on the balls of your feet. Do these 10 times, three times a day.

What to expect?

Minor soft tissue injuries of the knee take three to six weeks to heal properly. During this recovery time it is important to continue gently moving your knee and to complete gentle exercises, as prescribed, to prevent the muscles around your knee from becoming weak or switching off.

Your exercises will help maintain strength and function and optimise your recovery.

Follow up should be arranged either by the emergency physiotherapist, the emergency doctor or your general practitioner.

Please contact your local doctor if you develop:

- changes in sensation to your legs or knee including pins and needles
- change in colour of your knee, leg or toes, for example very red, blue or white
- pain that is worsening or you cannot weight bare on your affected knee
- abnormal swelling or a worsening change in swelling around the affected area
- if the area becomes hot and red and or you develop fever-like symptoms.