

KNEE

Meniscus Tear

Inside the knee are two shock-absorbing pads of cartilage called menisci — one on the inside, one on the outside. A meniscus tear happens when one of these pads is damaged. The meniscus helps cushion the knee, spread weight evenly, and keep the knee stable.

How meniscus tears happen

Sudden injury — twisting the knee while the foot is planted, sports such as football, basketball, or skiing, or a sudden turn or pivot.

Wear and tear (degenerative tears) — more common as we get older, as cartilage weakens over time; can happen with simple movements like squatting or standing up.

Common symptoms

- Pain in the knee, often along the joint line
- Swelling, which may appear over hours or days
- Stiffness
- Catching, clicking, or locking of the knee
- A feeling that the knee may "give way"
- Difficulty fully straightening or bending the knee

Some small tears cause only mild symptoms.

How it's diagnosed

A medical history and physical exam, an MRI scan (the best test to visualize meniscus tears), and sometimes X-rays to check for arthritis or bone problems.

Treatment

Treatment depends on the size and type of tear, your age, activity level, presence of arthritis, and the severity of symptoms.

Non-surgical treatment is often effective for small or degenerative tears, and includes rest and activity modification, ice and anti-inflammatory medication, physical therapy, and sometimes a knee brace.

Surgical treatment may be recommended if the knee keeps locking, pain does not improve, the tear is large or unstable, or you are very active or an athlete. Common procedures include meniscus repair (stitching the tear, preferred when possible) and partial meniscectomy (trimming the damaged part). Most of these surgeries are done arthroscopically.

Recovery

Without surgery, improvement typically occurs over weeks to months, with physical therapy playing an important role. After surgery, walking usually resumes within a few days, with return to daily activities in two to six weeks. Return to sport is typically four to six weeks after trimming, or three to six months after a repair.

Can a meniscus tear heal on its own?

Some tears can heal, especially those near the outer edge where blood supply is better. Others may not heal fully but can still become pain-free and functional with treatment.

Long-term outlook

Most people return to normal activities, have good pain relief, and regain knee function. Removing too much meniscus can increase the risk of knee arthritis, which is why we try to preserve as much meniscus as possible.

Key takeaway

A meniscus tear is a common knee injury. Many people recover well with physical therapy alone, while others may need keyhole surgery. Early assessment and the right treatment plan lead to the best results.