

Meniscus Tears

WHAT IS THE MENISCUS?

The meniscus is a C-shaped rubbery piece of fibrocartilage. They sit between the thighbone (femur) and the shinbone (tibia). They work with the articular cartilage on the ends of these bones to help cushion and stabilize the knee joint. When people talk of tearing the cartilage, they are usually referring to a torn meniscus. There are two menisci in each knee: one on the inside (medial) and one on the outside (lateral) of the knee.



WHY DO THEY TEAR?

A meniscus can tear for a variety of reasons. The meniscus can tear after a trauma or significant twisting/bending injury to the knee and may be associated with other injuries as well. In some patients, the meniscus can become degenerative and may tear gradually or tear with minimal trauma, such as getting up off the floor or stepping off a curb. Athletes, particularly those who play cutting or twisting sports, are at a higher risk for tears in the meniscus.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

The symptoms of a meniscus tear can vary depending on the type of tear and the location. Typically, patients describe sharp pain and swelling in the knee. Many people also describe mechanical symptoms, such as catching or locking in the knee. These sensations are typically painful or uncomfortable.

DO I NEED SURGERY?

If the knee is locked (which means you cannot bend or fully straighten it), you should be seen for an urgent surgical consultation. Other tears should be assessed based on type and location of the tear and additional symptoms. Without any mechanical symptoms, patients can often be treated with rest, ice, over-the-counter pain medications, physical therapy, and/or injections. Surgical management typically involves a knee scope for debridement or repair. Meniscus tears in younger patients are more likely to be repairable than tears in older individuals.

ARE THERE ANY ADVERSE OUTCOMES?

A locked meniscus tear can lead to new injuries. These should be evaluated as soon as possible. Some meniscus tears without mechanical symptoms can get better on their own, but sometimes the symptoms return. Once the meniscus is torn, some of the cushion is gone, which can put more stress on other parts of the knee and increases the risk of future or progressive arthritis.