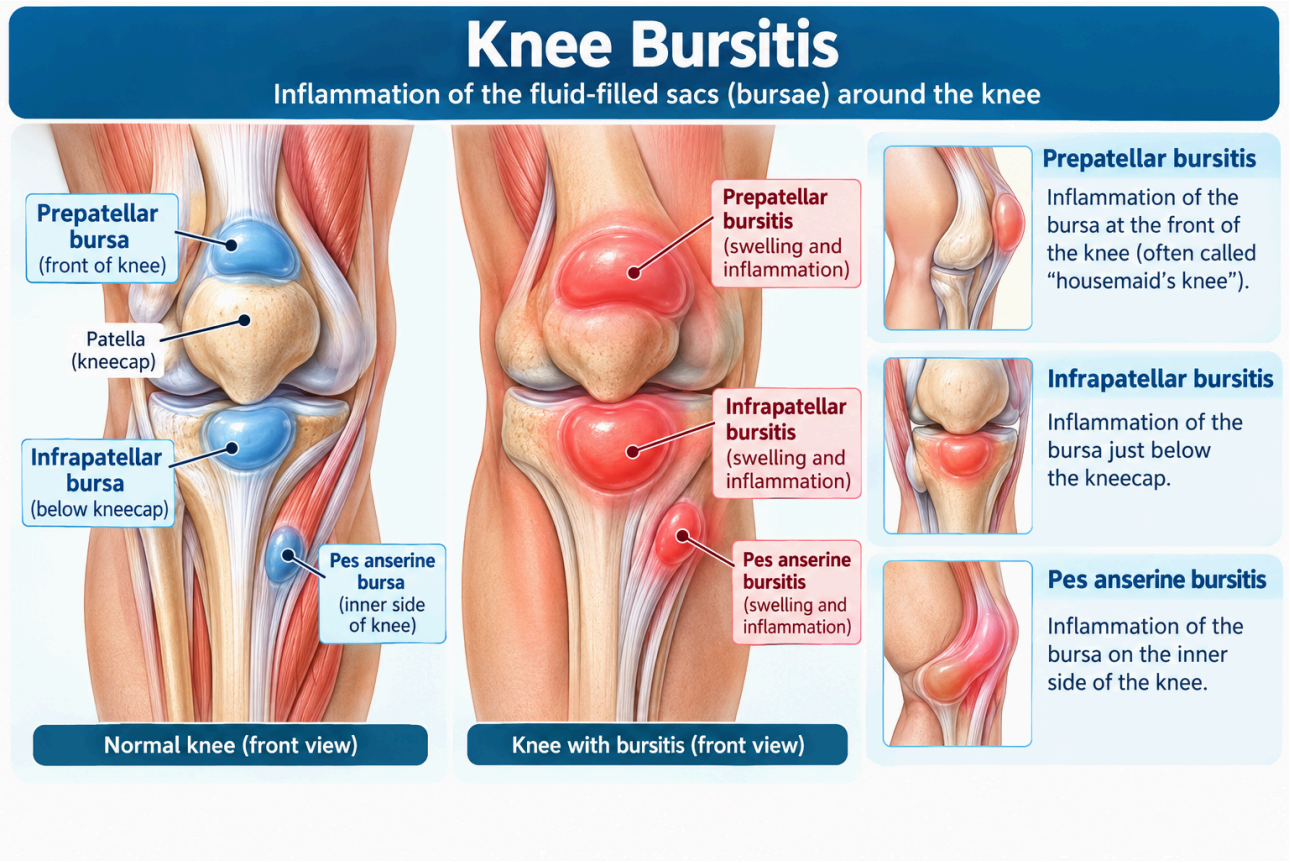
Knee Bursitis

Understanding knee swelling, symptoms and treatment

Knee Bursitis



What is knee bursitis?

Knee bursitis is inflammation of a small fluid-filled sac (bursa) that cushions and reduces friction around the knee.

Common types

Prepatellar: front of knee (housemaid's knee).
Infrapatellar: below the kneecap.
Pes anserine: inner side of the knee.

Causes and symptoms

Recognising knee bursitis and understanding possible triggers

Common causes

Repeated pressure or friction, such as prolonged kneeling.
Injury or trauma, such as a fall or bump.
Overuse from sport or repetitive movement.
Infection of the bursa (uncommon).
Other conditions, including arthritis or gout.

Symptoms

Swelling around the knee.
Pain, tenderness or warmth in the affected area.
Pain that worsens with movement or pressure.
Sometimes redness or fluid collection.
Reduced knee movement when swelling is severe.

Diagnosis

A GP or physiotherapist can assess the knee through examination.
Ultrasound or MRI may be used if needed to exclude other problems.
Fluid aspiration may be considered when infection is suspected.

Who is more likely to develop bursitis?

People who kneel frequently at work or during hobbies, and those taking part in repetitive knee activities, may be at greater risk.

Reducing pressure on your knee

Take regular breaks from kneeling, use cushioned knee pads when needed, and build up activity gradually. Avoid activities that repeatedly trigger swelling.

When to seek medical advice

Seek prompt medical advice if your knee becomes very red, hot or swollen, or if you have a fever. These can be signs of infection.

Exercise examples

Gentle stretching and strengthening with physiotherapy guidance

Knee Bursitis - Exercise Examples

Knee Bursitis – Exercise Examples

Gentle exercises to improve flexibility, strengthen the muscles and reduce stress on the knee

1 Heel slides



- Lie on your back with one leg straight and the other bent.
- Slowly slide the heel of the bent leg towards your bottom, then straighten.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

2 Quadriceps sets



- Lie on your back with your leg straight and a rolled towel under the knee.
- Gently tighten the thigh muscle by pushing the back of your knee down into the towel.
- Hold for 5–10 seconds, then relax.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

3 Straight leg raises



- Lie on your back with one knee bent and the other leg straight.
- Keep your knee straight and slowly lift the straight leg.
- Hold for 5 seconds, then lower slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

4 Hamstring stretch (on wall)



- Lie on your back with one leg straight up against a wall.
- Keep the other leg flat on the floor.
- You should feel a gentle stretch at the back of your thigh.
- Hold for 20–30 seconds, each leg.

5 Calf stretch (standing)



- Stand facing a wall with one leg behind the other.
- Keep your back leg straight and heel on the floor.
- Lean forward until you feel a stretch in your calf.
- Hold for 20–30 seconds, each leg.

6 Hip adductor stretch



- Lie on your back with the soles of your feet together and knees bent.
- Gently let your knees fall out to the sides.
- You should feel a stretch on the inner thighs.
- Hold for 20–30 seconds.

7 Sit to stand



- Sit on a sturdy chair with your feet flat on the floor.
- Slowly stand up, keeping your knees aligned over your feet.
- Sit down slowly.
- Repeat 8–12 times.

8 Knee range of movement



- Sit on a chair with your back supported.
- Slowly straighten your knee, then bend it back as far as comfortable.
- Move within a pain-free range.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

Exercise safely

- Start with gentle, comfortable movements and progress gradually.
- Stop if pain or swelling increases.
- Avoid forcing any movement.
- Ask your physiotherapist which exercises are appropriate for you.

Returning to everyday activities

As swelling and discomfort settle, gradually return to walking and usual activities. Avoid prolonged kneeling or direct pressure on the swollen area. A physiotherapist can advise on suitable strengthening and activity changes.

Managing flare-ups

If your knee becomes sore or swollen after activity, reduce the aggravating movement and allow time to recover. Short periods of ice and avoiding direct pressure may help. Seek medical advice for increasing redness, warmth, fever or marked swelling.

Progressing your exercises

Build up gradually according to comfort and function. Your physiotherapist can tailor the exercises to your symptoms and recovery goals.

Treatment and when to seek help

Managing knee bursitis safely

Rest and activity modification

Avoid kneeling, running or activities that worsen symptoms.
Use a cushion or knee pad if kneeling is necessary.

Pain relief

Use an ice pack for 10-15 minutes several times a day.
Ask your GP or pharmacist about suitable pain relief.

Physiotherapy and self-management

Gentle stretching and strengthening may improve movement.
Return gradually to activity; elevate and ice the knee if swollen.

Other treatments

Fluid aspiration or injection may be considered by a clinician.
Surgery is rarely needed, usually for persistent or infected bursitis.

When to seek medical advice

Seek medical assessment if the knee becomes red, hot or very swollen, you have a fever, or pain is not improving.

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