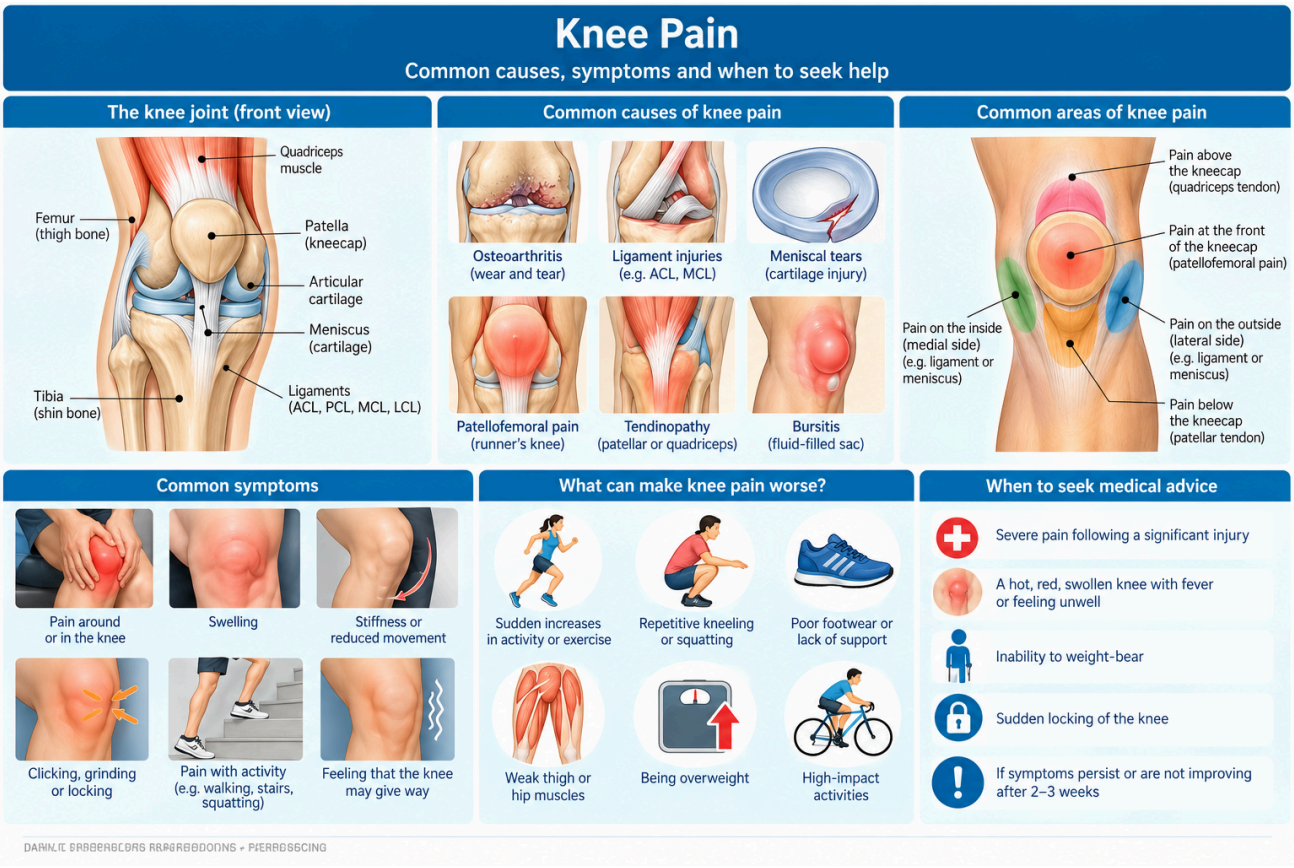
Knee Pain in Adults

Understanding causes, symptoms and recovery

Knee Pain in Adults

A guide to managing knee pain and staying active



What is knee pain?

Knee pain is common in adults and may begin after an injury or develop gradually. It can affect walking, stairs, kneeling and daily activities.

Common causes

Osteoarthritis, ligament injuries, meniscal tears, patellofemoral pain, tendinopathy, bursitis and repetitive overuse can all cause knee pain.

Symptoms and diagnosis

Recognising knee symptoms and understanding assessment

Common symptoms

Pain at the front, back or sides of the knee; swelling or stiffness; discomfort with stairs, walking or squatting; clicking, grinding, locking, giving way or reduced strength.

What can make knee pain worse?

Sudden increases in exercise, repeated kneeling or squatting, unsuitable footwear, weak thigh or hip muscles and excess load on the knee.

How is knee pain diagnosed?

A GP or physiotherapist will ask about your symptoms and activity and examine knee movement and strength. X-ray or MRI is used when clinically indicated; most knee pain does not require a scan.

Managing symptoms early

Keep moving within comfort and temporarily reduce activities that significantly worsen pain. Gradually resume normal activities as symptoms improve.

Exercises and rehabilitation

Gentle movements to improve knee strength and function

Knee Pain – Exercise Examples

Gentle exercises to improve strength, flexibility and knee function

1 Quadriceps sets



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

2 Straight leg raises



- Lie on your back with one knee bent and the other straight.
- Keep your knee straight and slowly lift your leg to the height of the bent knee.
- Hold for 3–5 seconds, then lower slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

3 Short arc knee extension



- Lie on your back with a rolled towel under your knee.
- Slowly straighten your knee, lifting your foot up.
- Hold for 5 seconds, then lower slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

4 Sit to stand



- Sit on a sturdy chair with your feet hip-width apart.
- Stand up slowly, keeping your knees aligned over your toes.
- Sit down slowly with control.
- Repeat 8–12 times.

5 Step ups



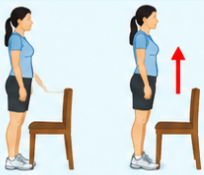
- Use a sturdy step with a handrail if needed.
- Step up with the affected leg, keeping your knee aligned over your toes.
- Step back down slowly.
- Repeat 8–12 times, each leg.

6 Wall squats (small range)



- Stand with your back against a wall and feet shoulder-width apart.
- Slowly slide down a small distance (no deeper than 30–45°).
- Keep your knees in line with your toes.
- Hold for 5–10 seconds, then stand up.
- Repeat 8–12 times.

7 Heel raises



- Stand behind a chair or support.
- Rise up onto your tiptoes, lifting your heels.
- Hold for 3–5 seconds, then lower slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times.

8 Hamstring stretch



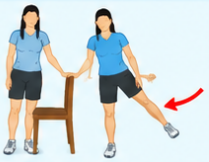
- Sit on a chair with one leg straight and the other bent.
- Keep your back straight and gently lean forward from your hips until you feel a stretch at the back of your thigh.
- Hold for 20–30 seconds, each leg.

9 Calf stretch



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

10 Hip abduction (standing)



- Stand tall holding on to a chair for balance.
- Keep your knee straight and slowly move your leg out to the side.
- Hold for 3–5 seconds, then return slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

11 Knee flexion (standing)



- Stand holding on to a chair for balance.
- Gently bend your knee, bringing your heel towards your buttocks.
- Hold for 3–5 seconds, then lower slowly.
- Repeat 10–15 times, each leg.

12 Single leg balance



- Stand on one leg, keeping your knee slightly bent.
- Keep your hips level and your knee aligned over your toes.
- Hold for 10–30 seconds.
- Repeat 3–5 times, each leg.

Exercise safely

- Start with gentle, pain-free movements and build strength gradually.
- Keep exercises within a comfortable range.
- Stop if pain increases or you feel unwell.
- Ask your physiotherapist which exercises are most suitable for you.

Exercise safely

Start with comfortable movements and build up gradually.

Keep knee movement controlled; avoid exercises that worsen pain.

Ask your physiotherapist which exercises suit your condition.

Treatment and self-management

Practical steps to manage symptoms and support recovery

Activity modification

Stay active within comfort. Reduce painful high-impact activities temporarily, then increase activity gradually as symptoms improve.

Physiotherapy and exercise

Strengthen the thigh, hip and calf muscles with a tailored plan. A physiotherapist can help improve knee control and movement.

Pain relief and daily care

Wrapped ice for 10-15 minutes may ease pain or swelling. Ask a GP or pharmacist about suitable pain relief.

Recovery and lifestyle

Supportive footwear, regular exercise and weight management may help. Recovery time depends on the cause of knee pain.

When to seek urgent help

Get urgent assessment for a hot swollen knee with fever, inability to bear weight, severe injury or a suddenly locked knee.

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