



# Ask the Expert

## Find Answers to Your Sport Medicine Questions

### What is a Meniscus?

**Q:** *I play ball hockey 3 times a week. Two months ago, during a game, I felt a very sharp pain when I twisted on my left knee. My knee did not swell, but it remains quite sore on the inside. I can walk, bike and swim but running, squatting, kneeling and twisting on my knee hurts. A friend thinks I have a meniscus injury. What is a meniscus and do you think I may have injured mine? Eugene*

**A:** Dear Eugene: Sorry to hear you are injured. Menisci are C-shaped cartilage discs found deep within the knee. We have 2 in each knee. The inside one is called the medial meniscus while the outside one is called the lateral meniscus. Menisci perform several important functions: 1. they act as shock absorbers that reduce the impact loads on other knee structures; 2. their shape helps stabilize the knee; and 3. they also help lubricate the movement of the knee.

Meniscus injuries are very common and are almost always caused by one of two mechanisms. The most common mechanism is twisting your knee with your foot firmly planted on the ground – this is perhaps what you did. The second mechanism is due to age-related degeneration of the meniscus. As we age our menisci become increasingly brittle and can be cracked by something as simple as walking down a step.

The symptoms of a meniscus injury include pain with squatting, kneeling or twisting the knee. There may be little if any knee swelling. The knee can ‘clunk’ or ‘click’ with certain movements. People with meniscus injuries may feel their knee is unstable. Occasionally a torn meniscus will shift and get trapped in the joint. When this occurs, the person will feel their knee is locked. Some people with meniscal injuries can run, bike and swim but others will find these activities painful.

Many meniscus injuries will resolve with time, physiotherapy and being careful to avoid aggravating activities. When these injuries fail to respond to conservative treatment people may require arthroscopic surgery may be required to repair or removed the damaged pieces.

The bottom line: Your history suggests you may have a medial meniscus tear. I recommend you be assessed by your health care provider to be properly diagnosed and treated. I know you enjoy playing ball hockey but you may need to find other ways to stay fit until your knee has fully recovered.

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*Dr. Darrell Menard is the Surgeon General's specialist advisor in sport medicine. He has worked extensively with athletes from multiple sports and has covered Canadian teams competing at multiple games including the 2012 Olympics and the 2016 Paralympic games. These articles were originally published in the Canadian Forces Journal, the Maple Leaf.*

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