Bursitis

Information for patients

What is bursitis?
Bursitis is the inflammation of a bursa.

What is a bursa?
A bursa is a small sac of fluid, and we have approximately 160 of these within the body. They are found around joints where a ligament or tendon passes over a bone, therefore acting like a shock absorber to reduce the amount of friction within the joint.

What are the most common examples of bursitis?
Prepatellar bursitis, housemaid’s knee. Pain is felt around the front of the knee.
Infrapatellar bursitis, clergyman’s knee. Pain is felt around the front of the knee.
Trochanteric bursitis, gives pain around the outside of the hip.
Psoas bursitis, gives pain around the front of the hip.
Retrocalcaneal bursitis, gives pain around the heel.

What are the causes of bursitis?
There are different reasons why a bursa becomes inflamed and painful. The four main causes are:

1. Over-use and repetitive movements
2. Trauma or injury
3. Infection (rare)
4. Inflammatory disease such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA) or gout

When the bursa becomes repeatedly over stretched or squashed it can often become inflamed. A good example of this is bursitis within the knee, also known as “housemaid’s knee” which is caused by repetitive kneeling.

A traumatic event can also be the cause of a bursa to become inflamed and painful, for example a fall onto the hip.

Very occasionally an inflamed bursa can become infected, and this is known as septic bursitis. The signs you should look out for are open wounds around the area, redness and increasing warmth around the joint and skin, and feeling generally unwell with fever, chills and sweats.
Patients who suffer with RA or gout can sometimes experience a flare-up where the bursa also becomes inflamed.

**What symptoms am I likely to experience with bursitis?**
The most common symptoms patients tend to experience are:

**Pain or tenderness** on and around the affected area, usually felt as a dull ache with movement or pressure on the area. For example, patients with bursitis of the hip cannot bear to lie on the affected side.

**Redness and warmth** around the affected area, especially around the knee and heel as the bursa is quite superficial to the skin. This is a sign that inflammation is present.

**Signs of inflammation**
- Swelling
- Redness
- Heat
- Pain

**How is a bursitis diagnosed?**
A bursitis is diagnosed by a physical examination. The physiotherapist will complete a thorough assessment starting with some questions about your symptoms and history, followed by an objective assessment where they will perform certain tests and movements to be able to make a diagnosis.

**How is bursitis treated?**
Initially treatment will involve decreasing the inflammation around the bursa. This will involve:

- Resting and avoiding movements and postures that aggravate your symptoms, for example with a patella bursitis you would need to avoid repetitive kneeling.
- Ice will also help decrease inflammation, but only if it is close enough to the skin. The knee and ankle would respond well to ice. However the bursa in the hip is too deep.
- A course of anti-inflammatory medication. It is important to take it regularly throughout the day for at least two weeks. This medication does not work if you only take it from time to time.

Once the inflamed bursa has settled it is important to address the causes that may be aggravating the bursa, for example tightness or weakness around certain muscle groups. This will help prevent the problem from recurring. Therefore your physiotherapist will give you a home exercise programme to follow.

If the above treatment has not helped reduce the pain, another treatment technique would be a local cortisone injection. This can be given either by a physiotherapist or GP.

It is important to combine the injection with the physiotherapy treatment. If you have any problems or questions do not hesitate to speak to your physiotherapist.