



# Weak in the knees

The largest joint in the body, the knee is susceptible to aging, overuse and injury

by PEGGY SIJSWERDA



## COSTCO CONNECTION

Costco members will find exercise equipment, gym memberships, supplements, pain patches, and over-the-counter and prescription medicines at Costco and on Costco.com.

**K**nee pain keeps many people from doing the activities they enjoy. But what causes knee pain? More important, how do you make the aches and pains go away?

The knee, the body's largest joint, is a hinge joint where three bones meet: the thighbone, or femur; the shinbone, or tibia; and the kneecap bone, or patella. In a healthy individual, cartilage protects these bones where they meet, but as a result of aging and overuse, the cartilage can wear down, which results in osteoarthritis, a condition that affects 18 percent of women and 10 percent of men age 60 and older, according to the World Health Organization.

### Listen to your body

"Pain is a warning signal," says Dr. Erik Wijtman, a physical therapist in private practice in Virginia Beach, Virginia. "You need to listen to your body." He blames much of the high

incidence of knee problems on "Boomeritis," a term coined by Dr. Nicholas A. DiNubile, an orthopedic surgeon at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, which refers to baby boomers' tendency to overdo exercise.

As you age, it's important to choose activities that don't involve repetitive steps and pounding the pavement, notes Wijtman. "We're taught to push ourselves, but the old saying 'No pain, no gain' is out. When it hurts, don't do it."

Besides overuse, causes of knee pain include mechanical problems, like muscle imbalance or a loose piece of cartilage in the joint, and knee injuries—from torn ligaments to meniscal tears. Athletes are especially prone to these injuries, which are caused by twisting the knee and by sudden starts and stops.



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Sometimes knee pain can be related to problems elsewhere in your body, says pain specialist Dr. Lisa Barr, a Costco member and author of *Outsmart Your Pain!* (Synergy Health Quest, LLC 2018; not available at Costco). “Osteoarthritis of the hip—even ankle injuries—can present as knee pain,” she notes. “That’s called referred pain, and it’s more common than people realize.”

A sedentary lifestyle is another reason people have knee issues. Lack of exercise means joints get stiff and lose their flexibility, Barr explains. Obesity and an inflammatory diet exacerbate the problem.

### Treating knee pain

Recent headlines touting the dangers of opioid addiction are making people think twice about grabbing that prescription bottle. Besides, according to Wijtman, taking pain medication “only covers

up the problem but doesn’t fix it.” A specialist can help uncover the root of your knee pain, he notes.

Once the cause of knee pain is determined, your care provider will discuss a treatment plan with you. This often involves lifestyle and dietary changes, says Wijtman, as well as exercises tailored to your age and activity level.

For osteoarthritis issues, Barr says, corticosteroid and viscosupplementation injections can help reduce pain for six months or longer. “For people who are interested in regenerative medicine, [injecting] PRP [platelet-rich plasma] is very, very effective and can last quite a long time,” she says. “This treatment helps to regenerate tissues from within.”

Barr recommends aquatic therapy and cross training to help improve muscle balance, especially for people recovering from an injury or surgery. “Everything is about the balance of power,” she says. “How our muscles work together is key to optimal joint function.”

In addition to exercise programs and injections, options for treating knee pain include acupuncture, cupping, dry needling and dietary changes. Rest, elevation, compression and ice can also help. Barr often prescribes supplements, such as turmeric and fish oil, for her patients, as well as adaptogens (herbs and roots that are marketed as helping the body resist physical, chemical or biological stressors).

Barr and Wijtman agree that surgery should be considered only after conservative care has failed. ■

Peggy Sijwerda writes about health and wellness issues.

## Knee needs

“Strengthening all the muscles around your knee will help reduce stress on the knee joint,” says physical therapist Erik Wijtman.

Here are a few tips:

- Begin with a warm-up, such as walking for five to 10 minutes.
- Next do some stretches. Make sure you stretch both the front of your thigh (the quads) and the back (hamstrings).
- Use a foam roller on your quads, hamstrings and the IT (iliotibial band) to decrease tightness and increase flexibility, says Dr. Lisa Barr.
- Functional exercises are best for strengthening your knees, says Wijtman. These include wall squats, step-ups (forward, backward, sideways) and balance exercises.
- Walk in a pool. Since water is almost 800 times denser than air, your body has to work harder to move.



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- Exercising your ankle by pretending your foot is a pencil and “writing” the letters of the alphabet in the air will improve your knee function, says Barr, because the knee depends on your ankles being strong.—PS