Baker’s cyst

What is a Baker’s cyst?

A Baker’s cyst is a swelling filled with synovial fluid, which forms behind the knee. Synovial fluid is the lubricating fluid that is usually found inside the knee joint.

What are the symptoms of a Baker’s cyst?

In some cases, a Baker’s cyst causes no pain and so remains unnoticed. The common symptoms of a Baker’s cyst are:

- swelling behind the knee
- pain behind the knee
- tightness in the back of the knee
- knee stiffness
- difficulty moving the knee joint.
What causes a Baker’s cyst?

A valve-like system exists between the knee joint and the bursa (a sac of fluid) on the back of the knee, which regulates the amount of synovial fluid coming in and out of the bursa. When the knee produces too much synovial fluid (this happens when the knee is swollen) the excess fluid causes the bursa behind the knee to bulge and expand. This is what is known as a Baker’s cyst.

A Baker’s cyst can be the result of a problem with your knee joint, such as arthritis or a cartilage tear, which causes your knee to produce too much fluid. It sometimes also develops in people who do not have arthritis.

How is a Baker’s cyst treated?

You should visit your doctor if you think you have a Baker’s cyst. It will often disappear by itself, meaning you will not need treatment. There is nothing you can do to make it disappear.

If the Baker’s cyst is large and causes a lot of pain, your doctor may drain the fluid from the knee joint using a needle. Alternatively, your doctor can also inject a corticosteroid into the knee to reduce the volume of synovial fluid being produced. This will relieve the pain, but may not prevent the recurrence of a Baker’s cyst.

Your doctor will normally treat the underlying causes of the cyst, as well as the Baker’s cyst itself. For example, if you have a sports injury, such as a cartilage tear, then the torn cartilage may be removed.
Can a Baker’s cyst burst?

Rarely, a cyst may burst and leak synovial fluid into the calf region. If this happens, there may be a sharp pain at the back of the knee, swelling and sometimes redness of the calf. These symptoms closely resemble those of a blood clot in the leg (known as deep vein thrombosis or DVT). If these symptoms occur, a prompt medical evaluation will be needed.

What else can I do to help myself?

• Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (Nurofen) and diclofenac (Voltarol and many more) can reduce inflammation and pain.
• Ice packs can help reduce swelling and pain – wrap ice in a towel and apply for 10–20 minutes, or use a special cold pack, available from most pharmacies.

Real-life story:

I was about 20 and at university when I remember feeling a tightness at the back of my knee. I had no idea what it was, but I didn’t think it was related to my arthritis, as it wasn’t the joint itself affected.

About a month later, my Baker’s cyst burst. I had terrible swelling in the leg and it was very uncomfortable. My leg felt like it was the size of a tree trunk – I had to go into hospital for a week while the swelling subsided.

It’s been fine ever since and hasn’t come back.
How Arthritis Care can help you

Want to talk to someone about your arthritis?
Or read more about the condition?

Call our free, confidential Helpline on 0808 800 4050 for information and support. We’re open weekdays from 09:30 to 17:00 – we’d really like to hear from you.

We have over 40 free booklets and factsheets on various aspects of arthritis, from diet and surgery, to managing pain and fatigue. These can be sent to you in the post – just ask our Helpline staff for details.

Contact us

Our Helpline:
0808 800 4050

Our website:
arthritis.org.uk

Our offices:

England:
020 7380 6540

Northern Ireland:
028 9078 2940

Scotland:
0141 954 7776

Wales:
029 2044 4155

Social media:

@arthritis_care
facebook.com/arthritiscareuk

To make a donation all you need to do is visit arthritis.org.uk/donate or call us on 020 7380 6540

Thank you

Go online

You can download all our booklets and factsheets as PDFs from arthritis.org.uk/information

We also have an Online Community, where you can chat to others with arthritis, and can be reached at arthritisforum.org.uk

ISBN: 978-0-9955836-6-5

Note This information sheet may be photocopied and distributed freely on the condition that it is reproduced in its entirety and that it is not quoted without acknowledgement.