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.
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.

Go online

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

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

Arthritis Care and Arthritis Research UK have joined together  
to help more people live well with arthritis. Read how at  
arthritisresearchuk.org/merger. All donations will now go to  
Arthritis Research UK and be used to help people with arthritis  
live full and active lives in communities across England and  
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Thank you

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