

Fractures / Breaks around the Knee

Fractures around the knee occur with all types of injuries from the large forces found in sports to simple falls when missing steps. The suspicion of a fracture or other significant injury to the knee comes from the speed of swelling to the knee. If a knee swells a lot within the first 4 hours it is usually due to bleeding into the knee. The commonest causes of bleeding are fractures, ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) injuries and torn cartilages (menisci).

All knees that swell a lot within the first 4 hours should be seen at an A&E Department and have an X-ray of the knee. If the fracture is obvious like the one pictured below then you will be admitted and the fracture treated. Some fractures are difficult to see on X-rays and special scans are needed to see them. Therefore all knees that have a lot of swelling within the first 4 hours should be referred to a surgeon with a specialist interest in knees within one week.

Treatment

The aim of treatment is to put the bones into the right place and to hold them while the body heals itself, while at the same time allowing the knee to be kept moving.

If the bones are in the wrong place (as shown in the picture) you will require an operation to put them back in to the right place. Then some plates and screws will be used to hold them in place. This will allow the knee to be kept moving, but will not be strong enough to walk on, until the bones have healed.

If the bones are in the right place, but it appears as if they will move before the fracture heals. Again an operation with plates and screws will be required to hold the bones in the right place. This will allow the knee to be kept moving while the healing takes place, but not be strong enough to walk on.

If the bones are in the right place and it does not appear that they will move, an operation can be avoided. The knee will still require protection with a brace. Crutches will be required until the fracture has healed.

Stopping the knee moving for long periods of time (e.g. plaster casts) cause the knee to become very stiff. Therefore while the knee is healing, braces are used. These allow the knee to move backwards and forwards, but protect it from sideways movements.

It usually takes 3 – 4 months to recover from a fracture into the knee. A gradual increase in the amount of weight you can put through the knee will be allowed once the bones have started healing. Physiotherapy will be required.

In rare circumstances where the knee is already arthritic at the time of the fracture, a Total Knee Replacement will be the best treatment.

Any fracture to the knee will increase the risk of arthritis in the knee when you are older.

