

# Treating That Dull, Aching Misery

**B**ursitis is a dull, aching misery that you may be tempted to dismiss as “age.” In reality bursitis plays no favorites. It affects workers laying tiles or carpet, scholars reading dusty texts in the library and dancers torturing their feet in high heel shoes. It’s a common problem for aging athletes but also for younger ones and even for those whose major activity is the trek from the TV set to the refrigerator.

Small fluid-filled sacs, bursae (plural of bursa) are named after the Latin word for small pouch or purse. The human body

occur together.

Any of these problems can cause pain, swelling and limitation of movement. Generally speaking, however, bursitis is more of a dull, persistent ache rather than a sharp pain.

## Causes and Types

Filled with synovial fluid (similar to that which lines joints), a bursa is made to withstand stress and strain. It can become irritated or inflamed, however, as a result of overuse, tight muscles, misalignment of joints, awkward motions or injury. In rare cases, bursitis can be caused by an infection, in which case prompt treatment is crucial.

Maggie fell down the icy steps outside her home and landed hard on her elbows. She’s had tender elbows ever since. Less heroically, Joe injured the bursa in his shoulder by reaching into the back seat of the car to get a map.

Runners often get bursitis of the knee or hip because of repetitive movements, sometimes because of running on a slanted track or roadside or with one leg being slightly longer than the other.

Bursitis often plagues those who spend many years in an occupation requiring repetitive movements. There is “miner’s elbow,” caused by repetitive swinging of a pick, “weaver’s bottom,” associated with swaying back and forth while sitting on a hard surface and “scholar’s elbow,” resulting from long hours with elbows resting on a desk. A soft egg-shaped bump on the front of the knee is known as “housemaid’s knee” or “clergyman’s knee” because it can result from extended periods kneeling—whether praying, scrubbing floors or laying carpet.

One form of bursitis, along the inner part of the knee, is common among middle

aged and older women who are overweight and have osteoarthritis of the knee. Aching along the outside of the hip and along the thigh may indicate a type of bursitis frequently affecting middle aged and older persons, typically related to constant, improper bending (without using the knees) or to differences in leg length.

And there’s the familiar “pump bump,” bursitis at the back of the heel caused by the rubbing of tight-fitting shoes. Normally, there is no bursa at the back of the heel, but this one, like a callous, is

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comes designed with more than 150 bursae located at strategic points between muscles, bones and tendons. The idea is to provide protective cushioning, but occasionally the friction or stress of daily activities becomes too great. The result is irritation or inflammation of the bursa, known as bursitis.

Because bursae are usually located in the vicinity of major joints, it’s sometimes hard to distinguish bursitis from arthritis (inflammation of a joint), tendinitis (inflammation of a tendon) or pain caused by a tear or strain in a muscle. In many cases, bursitis develops as a result of arthritis or muscle tears; or all three can

formed as a protective cushion.

## Treating Bursitis

Like tendinitis, bursitis can usually be effectively treated at home.

Rest the affected area and apply ice for 15 to 20 minutes at a time several times a day as long as there’s swelling or the affected area is warm to the touch. Over-the-counter antiinflammatory medications such as aspirin, ibuprofen and naproxen can relieve the pain while reducing the swelling and inflammation. Heat can be used briefly to relieve pain and stiffness but only if the area is no longer warm, red

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or swollen; otherwise, heat can increase the inflammation.

Any condition that does not respond within 10 days to such self help measures should be evaluated by a doctor, since bursitis can occasionally be caused by an infection. Infectious or septic bursitis requires prompt treatment with antibiotics, often administered intravenously. A doctor may also need to surgically drain and/or remove the infected bursa sac.

Even non-infected bursae occasionally need to be drained. And one treatment involves injecting corticosteroids and pain-killing medications into the injured area. One injection often brings immediate and lasting relief.

Occasionally, pain that appears to be bursitis is actually a stress fracture in one of the nearby bones. This can be discovered through an x-ray, although an x-ray cannot detect bursitis.

### **Preventing Future Problems**

Even after treatment, bursitis may recur unless measures are taken to identify and correct whatever caused the problem in the first place.

Try to avoid activities that require you to repeat the same movements over and over. Or at least take frequent breaks. If you participate in two or more activities—such as running and biking—do them on alternate days.

Use knee pads when gardening or scrubbing the floor. And build up tool handles with tape and foam rubber and try to avoid gripping tools too tightly.

Pay attention to posture and learn the proper ways of lifting and bending. Bend with your knees rather than your hips and back. But use your feet, rather than your knees or upper body, to turn your body.

Be sure to warm up and stretch properly before exercise, although you should not stretch a joint while it is inflamed or sore. An exercise specialist

*Even after successful treatment, bursitis often recurs unless measures are taken to identify and correct whatever caused the problem in the first place.*

can help you learn specific stretches you may need, but it also helps to stretch all muscles at least once a day.

In many cases, bursitis develops because of a muscle imbalance or because a muscle is abnormally tight as a result of past injuries. Tight muscles can pull against a joint, putting undue stress on the nearby bursa. With the help of an exercise specialist, it may be possible to strengthen certain muscles in order to help realign the joint, thereby relieving some of the stress on the bursa.

Anyone will benefit from an overall strength training program, using a Nautilus machine or free weights. Whatever your age or the ailments that plague you, the best defense against aches and pains is a fit, well tuned body.

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## ***What Is Your Pain?***

Pain, swelling and tenderness in the vicinity of a joint can indicate one of several problems:

- Tendinitis is irritation or inflammation of a tendon—a thick, fibrous cord that attaches muscle to bone.
- Arthritis is redness, swelling and pain caused by inflammation of the joint itself.
- Bursitis is irritation or inflammation of a bursa, a small fluid-filled sac designed to serve as a cushion between bone, muscles, skin or tendons.
- Myofascial pain originates from tender “trigger” points in muscles.

The common symptom of all of the above is pain—often so severe that it’s hard to move and usually accompanied by swelling. Myofascial pain may be felt as a knot or tender spot deep within the muscle. Arthritis often brings about deformity of the joint, as well as significant stiffness. Whereas tendinitis usually brings a sharp pain, bursitis is more likely to be a dull, persistent ache.

[SOURCE: American College of Rheumatology Fact Sheet, Tendinitis/Bursitis, 2000; “Localized Pain Syndrome,” The Johns Hopkins Medical Handbook, Rebus, Inc., 1992]

## ***Bursitis and Bunions***

Even though a bunion usually involves misaligned joints in the big toe, the pain and swelling may result in part from inflammation of a bursa. Wearing shoes with plenty of room for the toes helps relieve the stress.

[SOURCE: Columbia University, “Bursitis,” Go Ask Alice General Health Archives]

## ***Hip Pain Often Bursitis***

Of patients seeing a doctor because of hip pain, about 60 percent are diagnosed with bursitis. The complaint is typically pain over the outer thigh with difficulty climbing stairs, getting up from a chair or exercising.

In about 95 percent of cases, the bursitis is attributed to abnormal patterns of standing and walking, leading to increased friction and irritation of the bursa.

[SOURCE: Greg Muirhead, “Diagnosing Bursitis of the Hip,” Patient Care, March 15, 2000]

## ***Torn Tendon May Be Culprit***

One Australian study of 24 women with hip pain and tenderness found that nearly all suffered from either a tear or tendinitis of the gluteus medius tendon. Only one subject had bursitis alone.

[SOURCE: “Are Tendon Tears Mistakenly Diagnosed as Hip Bursitis?” The Back Letter, March, 2001]

## ***Knee Bursitis: 3 Types***

Knee pain can often be attributed to inflammation in one of three major bursae that surround the knee joint.

The *prepatellar bursa* at the tip of the knee, over the kneecap bone, can become inflamed either because of a direct blow or the repeated stress of kneeling, sometimes called “housemaid’s knee,” “roofer’s knee” or “carpet layer’s knee.” Compared to arthritis, this type of bursitis causes only mild pain except when kneeling on it.

The *infrapatellar bursa* is located just under the kneecap beneath a large tendon. Inflammation, typically involving both the bursa and the tendon, often occurs as a result of jumping (“jumper’s knee”).

The *anserine bursa* along the inner part of the knee can become inflamed as a result of osteoarthritis, sometimes accompanied by being overweight.

[SOURCE: “Bursitis of the Knee,”

MedicineNet.com; “Localized Pain Syndrome,” The Johns Hopkins Medical Handbook, Rebus, Inc., 1992]

## ***Bursitis Often Involved In Rotator Cuff Tears***

In rotator cuff tears, bursitis may develop and become a significant source of shoulder pain. There is a buildup fibrous tissue and an accumulation of fluid in the bursa.

Symptoms include pain and tenderness plus a reduced range of motion in the affected shoulder. Early treatment is important to prevent frozen shoulder.

[SOURCE: Z.L. Szomor, X. Wang, A. Kruller, G.A.C. Murrell, K.M. Farmer, B.W. Kirkham and F. Bonar, “Differential Expression of Cytokines and Nitric Oxide Synthase Isoforms in Human Rotator Cuff Bursae,” Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases, April, 2001]

## ***Watch Out for Infections***

Infectious or septic bursitis is more common in areas such as the elbow or heel where the bursa is closer to the skin and can be invaded directly by bacteria. About 20 percent of olecranon bursitis (elbow) are caused by skin pathogens such as staphylococcus or streptococcus.

Septic bursitis usually has the same symptoms as nonseptic types—pain, tenderness, swelling and warmth.

[SOURCE: David L. Smith, “A Warm Elbow with Dry, Cracked Skin,” Patient Care, November 15, 1997]