

Women susceptible to knee woes

Did you know that one out of every four sports injuries involves the knee? Did you know that female athletes have a much higher rate of knee injuries than men?

Women are more likely to develop "runner's knee," the degeneration of the shock-absorbing cartilage under the kneecap that can occur in many kinds of sports and activities. Women are especially susceptible to a debilitating rupture of the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL), which helps stabilize the knee joint. Recent estimates are that women are two to eight times more likely to have an ACL injury than men in the same sports. Such injuries are a special concern in downhill skiing, and female skiers face a three-fold higher risk.

Your knees are put under a lot of stress, whether you're running, skiing, dancing, or cleaning house. Just climbing stairs can put pressure on each knee equal to three to four times your body weight. Functioning simultaneously as a hinge, lever, and shock absorber, the knee is the key to your ability to stand up, walk, climb, and kick. It depends almost entirely on soft tissue—ligaments, tendons, and muscles—for stability. Because of its complexity and the great forces to which it is routinely subjected, the knee is susceptible to a host of injuries, which can take weeks or months to heal.

A combination of many factors may help explain the higher risk of knee injuries, particularly to the ACL, among women. Women's

knees are supported by smaller, weaker muscles. Women have a wider pelvis than men, and their thigh bones angle inward more sharply from hip to knee, making their knees less stable. They tend to have stronger quadriceps and weaker hamstrings, and such an imbalance in thigh muscles can contribute to knee injuries. Interestingly, studies have found that women are more prone to ACL injuries during the first half (pre-ovulatory) phase of their menstrual cycle, suggesting that hormones may affect ligaments and other connective tissue.

TIPS FOR WOMEN (and men)

While you can't do anything about anatomical factors that increase the chance of knee injury, you can protect your knees when exercising or playing a sport and at other times. Here are steps that can help reduce the risk, especially if you're a woman who plays a sport:

- Lose weight if you are overweight
- Strengthen your leg muscles, notably the hamstrings
- Try to move in a balanced crouched position when exercising or playing a sport
- Do plyometric exercises
- Don't suddenly intensify or lengthen your workouts
- Make sure your shoes, particularly exercise shoes, fit well and are not worn out.

—Article submitted by *Caroline Harris, personal trainer/Run coach/Nutrition and Wellness Specialist*

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Fact or Fiction:

Exercise is bad for arthritis

(NC)-Many people with arthritis think they shouldn't exercise because it will further damage their joints. Nothing could be further from the truth. Activities that use large muscles, such as those in the arms and legs, are the most important part of any fitness program. Health care providers often recommend activities like aquafit, swimming, walking, cycling and dancing. They often suggest working out with a friend or joining an exercise group since it can make the experience more enjoyable.

Other suggestions include:

Work up to exercising for a total of at least 30 minutes, three to five times a week. Regular exercise is the key to success, but it doesn't have to be all at one time. Three 10-minute periods of exercise a day work just as well as one 30-minute session.

Do weight-bearing exercises. Activities such as walking help to build strong bones and prevent osteoporosis. Exercising with hand and ankle weights or weight machines is another way to increase strength and reduce pain without making the joints worse. You can consult a physiotherapist or fitness instructor to create an effective custom program.

Proceed with Caution

To help you get started, visit www.arthritis.ca/lifestyle to sample some exercises; but remember to take it easy at the beginning and consult a health care provider about exercise plans if you have any questions or concerns.