Osteoarthritis Meniscus Tear

by MARLENE WALLACE

Osteoarthritis and Meniscus Tears

I have had injury-related osteoarthritis of the lower back and neck for many years. In the last year, I have also developed moderate osteoarthritis in my knees as part of normal aging. What I didn't realize until very recently is how common meniscal tears are when you have osteoarthritis in your knees.

In the winter, I accidentally slipped on a wet ceramic floor. My right foot went out from underneath me. I injured my left knee when I transferred all my weight onto my left leg to keep myself from falling. It hurt a bit at the time, but it wasn't until the next morning that I noticed my left knee was very swollen, stiff and painful; it's been that way ever since!

I went to see my doctor immediately. Initially, he thought I had mildly strained my LCL (lateral collateral ligament). Rest, elevation, ice, bracing and minimal exercises were prescribed. After six weeks, my knee was still no better.

Back to the doctor! He gave me a cortisone injection and withdrew quite a bit of fluid from my knee at the same time. The pain and stiffness improved for a few weeks, but both returned.

At my next doctor's appointment, I was referred to a physiotherapist. After four weeks of having two sessions a week, the flexibility and strength in my left knee were considerably better, but the swelling was not better. The physiotherapist indicated that she couldn't do any more for me.

After a two-week vacation in Europe, where I probably did far more walking and stair climbing than I should have, I went back to my doctor yet again! This time, he ordered an MRI, intending to send me to an orthopedic surgeon based on what it revealed.

Nineteen weeks after I injured my knee, I had the MRI. The results showed I had torn my lateral meniscus quite badly. Arthroscopic surgery is now in order!

Since finding out I have a torn meniscus, I have been doing quite a bit of reading about this common knee injury. While I knew that sports-related meniscal injuries are very prevalent in young, active individuals, I was not aware that meniscal tears frequently occur spontaneously as we get older.

Located on either side of the knee, the menisci distribute force evenly over the joint. They act as "shock absorbers" during everyday knee usage. Osteoarthritis, the most common joint disease in people 50+, is highly related to meniscal tears. So, all of us who have arthritis of the knee are susceptible to meniscal tears!

It is not at all surprising that meniscal tears could happen during a physical game of soccer or football when players twist their knees the wrong way. However, there are also studies indicating that spontaneous meniscal injuries often occur in middle-aged and older adults.

A 2008 Research Study:

In 2008, an interesting study was published in The New England Journal of Medicine, which reported results on the knees of almost 1,000 males and females ranging in age from 50 to 90 years. Participants were not selected based on the presence of knee joint symptoms. Rather, they were representative of the general population.

Overall, 31% of the knees studied had a meniscal tear. Twenty-one percent of 50- to 59-year-olds had meniscal tears in their right knees, while 46% of 70- to 90-year-olds had this injury. Tears occurred more frequently in men than women. On the other hand, 70 to 90-year-old females had more destruction of the meniscus. In other words, they had a total absence of normal meniscal tissue (i.e., not defined as a tear).

Among participants who documented evidence of knee osteoarthritis, 82% had some degree of meniscal damage. This percentage was compared to 25% of people who did not have osteoarthritis. This shows a strong correlation between meniscus injuries and osteoarthritis of the knees.