



Bursitis

Your questions answered

Q. What is bursitis?

A. Bursitis is caused by the inflammation or irritation of a bursa. The plural of bursa is bursae.

Bursae are small fluid-filled sacs that cushion your bones and soft tissues (muscles, tendons and skin) in and around your joint.

They reduce friction between moving parts (e.g. between a bone and a tendon), enabling them to move smoothly over each other.

When a bursa becomes irritated or inflamed, it fills up with excess fluid. This causes pain and restricts movement.

Bursitis can be effectively treated with self-care and medicine.

Q. What causes bursitis?

A. Bursitis can develop quickly (acute bursitis) or more slowly (chronic bursitis). Common causes include:

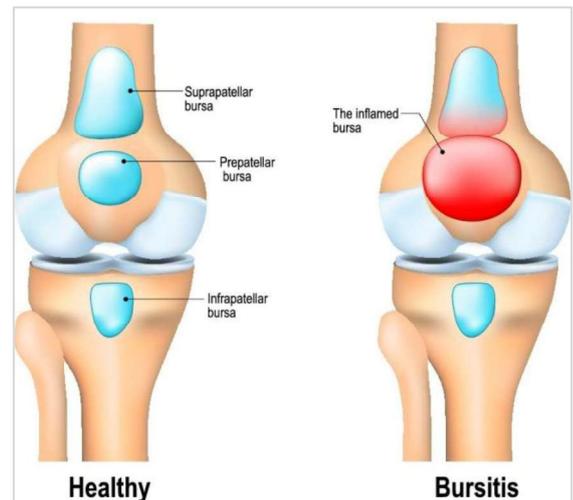
- overusing a joint, especially if the movements are repetitive, e.g. typing, production-line packing, playing tennis
- prolonged pressure, e.g. kneeling for long periods while laying carpet or scrubbing floors
- injury, e.g. having a fall and landing hard on your hip
- joint stress, e.g. from being overweight or an uneven walk (gait)
- other health conditions, e.g. [rheumatoid arthritis](#), [gout](#), [diabetes](#)
- infection, e.g. if a joint is injured and bacteria enter the bursa.

Q. What are the symptoms of bursitis?

A. The signs and symptoms of bursitis include:

- pain, especially when moving the joint
- joint stiffness and swelling
- restricted movement of the joint
- warmth and reddening of the skin in the affected area.

The most common joints affected by bursitis are the shoulder, elbow, hip, knee and heel.



Q. How is bursitis diagnosed?

A. If you have a painful, swollen joint or you're finding it difficult to move a joint, it's important that you discuss your symptoms with your doctor. Getting a diagnosis as soon as possible means that treatment can begin immediately. This will give you the best possible outcomes.

To diagnose your condition, your doctor will:

- Take your medical history - this will include asking about your symptoms, recent injuries, the work you do, and other health issues.
- Do a physical examination - they will look for redness and swelling in and around the joint and test your joint's range of movement.

If your doctor thinks your bursa is infected, they may remove a sample of fluid from your bursa. The fluid will be examined under a microscope for signs of infection.

Scans such as x-rays and ultrasounds are usually unnecessary; however, your doctor may send you for a scan to rule out the possibility of another condition.

Q. How is bursitis treated?

A. Some people can manage the pain, inflammation and stiffness of bursitis with self-care, such as heat and cold packs, rest and gentle exercise. However, other people will require medical treatment to manage.

In this case, your doctor may recommend using over-the-counter [non-steroidal anti-inflammatories \(NSAIDs\)](#). They can be taken as a tablet (orally) or applied directly to the skin (topically) as a cream or gel. In cases of severe pain, your doctor may prescribe stronger anti-inflammatory medicines or inject a [corticosteroid](#) into the bursa.

You may also see a physiotherapist or exercise physiologist who can recommend exercises to help your joints move more easily and prevent bursitis from occurring again.

If your bursitis is caused by an infection, your doctor will prescribe antibiotics to treat the infection. In some cases, a needle is inserted into the bursa to remove the infected fluid. This may happen several times until the infection has cleared.

If the bursitis was triggered by a particular form of overuse, it's important to avoid that activity or modify how you perform it. An occupational therapist or physiotherapist can help you find solutions to this problem.

Q. What can I do to control my symptoms?

A. You can do many things to relieve your pain and inflammation.

Protect and rest the joint to help the bursa recover. Your doctor or physiotherapist will advise you on how to rest the joint and for how long you should rest it. This could include using cushions or pads when sitting or kneeling for long periods, using a sling or walking stick, modifying your activities etc.

[Ice packs](#) are helpful to relieve red, inflamed joints, and [heat packs and rubs](#) can relax tense, painful muscles.

Maintain a [healthy weight](#) to reduce the pressure and stress on weight-bearing joints such as hips and knees.

Continue to stay active as much as you can while following any instructions provided by your healthcare team to protect your bursa.



Your doctor, physiotherapist and/or occupational therapist can offer other suggestions and strategies to reduce your risk of developing bursitis again.

Q. Where can I get more help?

A. Many people and support organisations can help you manage your Bursitis. They include:

- your doctor
- [occupational therapist](#)
- [physiotherapist](#)
- [exercise physiologist](#)
- Musculoskeletal Australia | msk.org.au | National Arthritis and Back Pain+ Help Line: 1800 263 265

Q. How can Musculoskeletal Australia help?

A. Our nurses are available for you to speak with about your bursitis, pain or any other musculoskeletal issues you have. You can contact them on weekdays between 9am-5pm. Phone 1800 263 265 or email helpline@msk.org.au. We also have a range of services – including free webinars – you can access on our [website](#).

More to explore

- [Bursitis](#)
Arthritis Foundation
- [Bursitis](#)
Johns Hopkins Medicine
- [Bursitis](#)
MSD Manual Consumer Version
- [Bursitis](#)
Versus Arthritis
- [Patient education: Bursitis \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)
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