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Knee Disorders

Knee injuries are a common long-term issue among UK veterans due to the physical demands of service. Whether sustained during training, active deployment, or through wear and tear over time, knee pain can significantly affect mobility, mental health, and quality of life.

Here is practical advice on understanding, managing, and recovering from knee injuries.

Common Knee Injuries

- **Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS)** – pain around the kneecap, often from load-bearing or overuse (runners knee)
- **Meniscal Tears** – cartilage damage often caused by twisting or squatting
- **Ligament Injuries** – ACL, MCL strains or ruptures from impact, jumping, or pivoting
- **Osteoarthritis** – degenerative wear, especially in veterans with long service history
- **Chronic Effusion or Instability** – repeated swelling, giving way, or weakness
- **Sprains and strains** (ligaments or muscles around the knee)
- **Meniscus tears** (cartilage damage inside the knee)
- **Tendon injuries** (like patellar or quadriceps tendinopathy)
- **Post-surgical rehabilitation** (after knee operations)

Symptoms To Watch For

- Pain during stairs, squatting, or prolonged sitting
- Swelling or stiffness, especially after activity
- Knee “locking” or “giving way”



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- Clicking, grinding, or reduced range of motion

Seek urgent medical advice if your knee swells rapidly, can't bear weight, or if you suspect a fracture or ligament rupture.

Exercise & Self-Management Plan

Exercise is the foundation of recovery. Start slow, stay consistent, and work within pain limits.

Phase 1: Acute Recovery

- Ice and elevation for swelling
- Avoid prolonged rest – aim for gentle movement
- Begin with simple exercises like:
 - Quad sets
 - Heel slides
 - Straight leg raises

Phase 2: Strengthening

- Add:
 - Mini squats
 - Step-ups
 - Clamshells (hip/glute activation)

Phase 3: Return to Function

- Progress to:
 - Wall sits
 - Resistance band walks
 - Single-leg balance drills
 - Low-impact cardio (e.g. cycling, swimming)

Tips For Long-Term Knee Health

- Maintain healthy **body weight** to reduce joint stress
- Warm up before exercise or long walks
- Avoid high-impact sports until cleared
- Use **knee supports** or insoles if advised
- Consider **psychological support** if pain impacts your mental health

When To Seek Specialist Help

- Pain lasting >6 weeks despite rehab
- Recurrent knee instability or locking
- Progressive loss of function
- Suspected ligament or cartilage tear

Early intervention improves outcomes. Don't wait—reach out

What To Expect When You See a Healthcare Professional

- They'll ask about how and when your knee was injured, your symptoms, and any difficulties moving or walking.
- A physical exam will check your knee's stability, range of motion, swelling, and pain points.
- X-rays or scans may be ordered if a fracture or serious damage is suspected.

Immediate Care Tips

- **Rest** your knee but avoid complete inactivity.
- Use **ice packs** for 15–20 minutes every few hours to reduce swelling.
- **Compression** with a bandage or knee brace can help support the joint.
- **Elevate** your leg to reduce swelling.
- Over-the-counter pain relief like **ibuprofen or paracetamol** can help (follow NHS guidelines).

Rehabilitation and Recovery

- Attend **physiotherapy** for personalised exercises to improve strength, stability, and flexibility.
- Gradually increase your activity — start with gentle movements, then progress to walking, cycling, or swimming.
- Balance and proprioception (joint position sense) exercises help prevent re-injury.

- For arthritis or chronic pain, weight management and low-impact exercise are important.

When To Seek Urgent Medical Attention

- If your knee is severely swollen or deformed.
- If you cannot put weight on your leg.
- If you experience numbness, tingling, or weakness below your knee.
- If you have signs of infection (redness, warmth, fever).

Key Tips to Remember

What Helps

Early gentle movement
Physiotherapy exercises
Ice and compression
Weight management
Seeking help early

Why It Works

Prevents stiffness and muscle loss
Builds strength and stability
Reduces pain and swelling
Reduces joint stress
Avoids worsening injury

Focus: Exercises for Recovery and Long-Term Strength

Knee injuries are common among veterans due to high-impact training, heavy load carriage, repetitive strain, and acute trauma. Proper rehabilitation is crucial to regain mobility, reduce pain, and prevent long-term disability.

This guide outlines safe, progressive **rehabilitative exercises**, suitable for most common knee conditions (e.g., ACL strain, patellofemoral pain, meniscal injuries, osteoarthritis).

Before You Start

- Always consult your **GP, physiotherapist, or NHS MSK service** before beginning a new exercise programme.
- Stop if pain worsens or swelling increases.
- Ice and elevate the knee after exercise if needed.

Phase 1: Early Rehabilitation (Acute Phase)

Focus: Reduce swelling, restore basic mobility

1. Quad Sets

- Sit or lie with the injured leg straight.
- Tighten your thigh muscle, pushing the knee down into the floor.
- Hold for 5 seconds, relax.
- 10–15 reps, 3x/day

2. Heel Slides

- Lie on your back, slowly slide your heel toward your buttocks.
- Stop before discomfort. Return.
- 10–15 reps, 2x/day

3. Straight Leg Raises

- Lie down, one knee bent, injured leg straight.
- Tighten your thigh and lift straight leg to match bent knee's height.
- 10 reps, hold for 5 sec, 2 sets

Phase 2: Strengthening (Subacute Phase)

Focus: Restore strength, improve control

4. Mini Squats

- Stand with feet hip-width apart, hold onto chair or wall.
- Squat down to ~45°, keep knees behind toes.
- 10–12 reps, 2 sets

5. Step-Ups (Low Step)

- Step up slowly with injured leg, then down.
- Use a stair or exercise step.
- 10 reps each leg, 2 sets

6. Clamshells (for hip/knee stability)

- Lie on side, knees bent.
- Keep feet together and lift top knee.
- 15 reps each side, 2–3 sets

Phase 3: Functional & Return to Activity

Focus: Dynamic control, endurance

7. Wall Sits

- Slide down wall until knees at ~90°, hold.
- Start with 10 seconds, progress to 30+
- 3 reps

8. Resistance Band Walks

- Loop resistance band around thighs.
- Side-step slowly while keeping tension in band.
- 10 steps each way, 2 sets

9. Single-Leg Balance (Advanced)

- Stand on one leg for 30 seconds.
- Try with eyes closed or unstable surface.
- 3 reps each leg

Tips for Long-Term Joint Health

- Maintain healthy weight
- Strengthen supporting muscles (hips, glutes, calves)
- Use knee supports or braces during early return to sport
- Avoid high-impact activities until cleared by a professional
- Prioritise consistency over intensity

Contact Us

For more information and support, get in touch with our advisors and veterans with lived experience today.



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