

## Directorate of Surgical Care

## Department of Orthopaedics

## Knee Arthroscopy: Information for Patients and Carers

### What is an Arthroscopy?

Arthroscopy is the examination of the inside of a joint, using a special illuminating instrument inserted through a small incision or 'portal'. The incisions are usually less than one centimetre in length. The arthroscope is slender (less than five millimetres in diameter) and has a fibre optic light source and a magnifying lens attached. Tiny instruments that are capable of cutting or shaving material from within the joint may be inserted through other small incisions, if necessary. A tiny camera mounted within the arthroscope transmits the images of the inside of the interior to a television monitor.

A common use of the arthroscope is the examination and surgical repair of the knee joint. Some of the conditions that may be diagnosed or treated by arthroscope include:

- Torn cartilage
- Damaged joint lining
- Torn ligament
- Damage to the knee cap (patella)
- Arthritis

### Why an operation may be needed

The operation allows for:

- Examination of the knee under anaesthesia to test the ligaments and cartilage (menisci).
- Examination of the inside of the knee with an arthroscope.
- Removal of damaged or abnormal tissue such as cartilage, joint surface, loose 'bodies' and joint lining.

## **The alternatives to treatment**

- Reduce the level of your physical activity.
- To take medications (such as anti-inflammatory drugs) to help reduce the swelling.
- To wear a supportive knee brace or bandage.
- To have physiotherapy, which can strengthen muscles in the knee joint.

## **Before the operation**

Prior to your operation you will be asked to attend a pre operative assessment clinic. At this appointment the operation will be discussed with you again making sure you are fit and well and that you still wish to go ahead with the operation. You will have the opportunity to ask any questions you might have about the operation and what you can expect.

## **During the operation**

Before surgery, the knee to be examined is shaved and washed with a special surgical scrub to reduce the possibility of infections.

The operation is usually performed under general anaesthetic. If you are having a general anaesthetic, you will have had nothing to eat or drink before your operation. The surgeon will make a small incision in the knee, then pass the arthroscope through the skin into the joint. A special camera sends the images to a television monitor. If necessary, instruments that can cut or shave are inserted into the joint through other small incisions.

Immediately after the arthroscopy you can expect:

- Your Nursing Team will monitor your blood pressure, pulse, temperature and breathing.
- You will be offered pain medication.
- You can drink fluids straight away, as long as you do not feel sick.
- Your leg may be raised for a period of time.
- Ice packs maybe used to reduce any swelling.
- You will have a large bandage covering your knee.

## **After the operation**

Taking care of yourself at home:

After 48 hours, please remove all the bandages and apply small dressings to the operation site and cover with elasticated bandage for support. These will be provided before your go home by the Nurse.

- You will be seen in outpatient's clinic to discuss the findings of the operation.
- You may need to use crutches (up for one week) to take the pressure off your knee joint. These will be provided by the physiotherapist.
- Raise the affected leg as often as you can for the first couple of days.
- Gently and regularly flex (bend) the knee joint, as soon as you feel able.
- A cold pack applied to the joint may help to reduce swelling and discomfort.
- Avoid vigorous activity.
- It may take around one week before you are able to drive your car again.
- Most people can resume their normal activities around three weeks after the procedure, although this depends on individual factors.
- You may need to avoid sports and vigorous physical activity for two to three months.

## **The benefits of treatment**

- 1 To gain knowledge of the problem in your knee.
- 2 To relieve symptoms, if the condition is correctable through the arthroscope.
- 3 An early return to activity.

## **Complications**

- 1 The commonest is swelling which may last for a couple of weeks. This may be helped by an anti-inflammatory medication.
- 2 Occasionally there is bleeding into the joint, which causes unexpected pains – please come to the Accident & Emergency Department if this occurs.

## **Rare complications**

- 1 Thrombosis in the leg – report swelling of the leg or breathlessness to your own Doctor or come into the Accident & Emergency Department.
- 2 The tourniquet used to hold blood out of the leg during surgery could cause weakness in the leg, which almost always recovers fully.
- 3 In some cases, complications such as heart attack, thrombosis or chest infection can occur following any operation.

## **Very rare complications**

- 1 Infection is rare because of the volume of fluid used to wash out the knee.
- 2 The artery nerves and vein lie just behind the knee and can be damaged.

## **Long term outlook**

Arthroscopic surgery can successfully treat many knee conditions, such as torn meniscus cartilage. However, certain problems (such as arthritis) tend to have a variable success rate. The scars from the procedure are tiny and unobtrusive. See your doctor if you experience signs of infection, including:

- Red, inflamed or weepy incision sites

- Unusual pain in the knee
- Calf swelling despite elevation

## **Useful Contact numbers**

If you need more information or assistance please do not hesitate to contact the Orthopaedic Ward. The telephone numbers are as follows:

01283 566333 ext. 5140

Or ask for: -

Dawn Wallace, Clinical Nurse Manager  
01283 566333 ext. 5144  
During Office Hours

If you want any more information you could also contact NHS Direct, which is a reliable and comprehensive source of advice and information.

Telephone: 0845 4647

Email: [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)