

Painful Yet Treatable: The Infamous Runner's Knee

Knee pain is one of the most prevalent complaints of pain among runners. There are many diagnoses and reasons for a runner to have knee pain, but the most common diagnosis is patellofemoral pain syndrome, also known as PFPS or "runner's knee." Because it may result in a significant amount of pain, runner's knee can stop even the most veteran runners from training and competing.

What is PFPS?

What is patellofemoral pain syndrome? The patella refers to the kneecap. The femur is the thigh bone on which the patella sits. When you bend your knee, the patella increases contact with the femur. Pain results when the patella does not track properly along the joint. You can feel the pain when you are doing an activity (running, stairs, squatting, biking), but also when you are not active (sitting at a desk, riding in a car, watching a movie).

The most widely accepted reason why PFPS develops is due to a mechanical imbalance of the muscles in the legs. This can be due to overuse/overtraining, a sharp increase in training intensity, anatomical reasons (flat feet) or a lack of cross training.

PFPS typically causes pain around or behind the kneecap. The pain can be dull or sharp and is usually not associated with an injury. While you might not have pain initially, it can develop as mileage increases and can even be severe enough to cause you to stop running. You also might have a popping, clicking or "crunchy" feeling in the knee. In most cases, the pain comes from an imbalance of the quadriceps muscles (in front of the thigh), hamstrings (behind the thigh) or gluteal muscles (along the side of the hip). Anatomical issues that may cause PFPS include flat feet or poor alignment between the knee and the hip.

Treating PFPS

How can you treat the pain so that you can continue to train and perform? I have seen PFPS resolve quickly with simple treatments, but in most cases it may take four to eight weeks. Conservative treatments are the foundation for resolving the pain. The first suggested treatments are ice and anti-inflammatories (Motrin, ibuprofen, Aleve) to help with the symptoms. These are good for pain relief but are not likely to address the underlying issue.

A consult with a physical therapist and dedication to a therapy program will usually resolve the pain. A physical therapist will be able to evaluate any imbalance and help you progress back into running. Other treatments may include patellar taping, knee bracing or orthotics for flat feet. It's important to note that a runner can continue to train with a diagnosis of PFPS, although if the pain is intense and limited I would recommend cross training and a decrease in running to prevent further mechanical changes or other injuries.

There are many other diagnoses that can cause knee pain. PFPS is only one of them. If your pain continues despite rest and simple treatments, it is important to be evaluated, diagnosed and treated appropriately.

If you have any questions or are struggling with an injury or lingering pain, the experienced sports medicine physicians at Spectrum Health Orthopedics would be pleased to help. You can call them at (616)267-8860 or learn more on our [website](#).