

My Knee Hurts on the Stairs

Understanding Stair-Related Knee Pain

Why Do Stairs Cause So Much Knee Pain?

Stairs are one of the most demanding activities for the knee joint. Going up a single step requires your quadriceps to generate force equal to roughly three times your body weight through the kneecap joint. Going downstairs is even more demanding — the knee must control and absorb your body weight through an eccentric (lengthening) muscle contraction, generating forces of four to five times body weight.

This is why people with a wide range of knee conditions — arthritis, kneecap problems, meniscus issues, weakness — commonly notice stairs as their first or worst symptom. The stairs are not creating the problem; they are revealing one that is already there.

What Might Be Causing My Stair Pain?

Going UP stairs is harder:

- Quadriceps weakness — the main muscle for pushing up is not strong enough
- Hip weakness — causing the knee to collapse inward on the step
- Patellar tendinopathy — the tendon below the kneecap is irritated under load

Going DOWN stairs is harder (most common):

- Patellofemoral syndrome — kneecap pressure peaks on descent
- Chondromalacia — rough cartilage behind the kneecap grinding under force
- Knee osteoarthritis — arthritic surfaces compressed and loaded on descent
- Meniscus issues — the meniscus is compressed and stressed going downstairs
- Quad weakness — eccentric control is insufficient to lower body weight smoothly

Both directions equally painful:

- Significant arthritis or joint swelling
- Ligament instability causing pain in multiple planes

What Does Stair Pain Feel Like?

- Aching or sharp pain at the front, inside, outside, or behind the kneecap
- The knee "giving way" or feeling unstable on a step
- Needing to hold the railing and go one step at a time
- Pain that builds over a flight of stairs and lingers afterward
- Clicking or grinding sensation during stair use
- Fear of going downstairs, especially without a railing

What Makes It Worse?

- Steep stairs or steps with no railing
- Carrying weight while on stairs
- Going downhill as well as downstairs
- Stair use when the knee is already swollen or stiff
- Multiple flights of stairs

When Should I Seek Urgent Care?

- A fall on the stairs due to the knee giving way
- Inability to use stairs at all due to pain or instability
- Sudden significant worsening after a specific event
- Severe swelling, warmth, or redness

The Good News

Stair pain is one of the most reliably improved complaints with physical therapy. By identifying the underlying cause, strengthening the quadriceps and hip muscles, improving kneecap tracking, and practicing step-specific movement patterns, the vast majority of patients see dramatic improvement. Many patients who could barely manage one flight of stairs before PT return to climbing multiple flights with confidence and little to no pain.

The vast majority of patients see **dramatic improvement** in stair pain with a focused physical therapy program targeting their specific underlying cause.

This information is for general educational purposes only and is not a substitute for a professional evaluation. Call us today — we have immediate openings with no waitlist.

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