

Patella Chondromalacia

What You Need to Know

What Is Patella Chondromalacia?

Chondromalacia patellae refers to the softening, roughening, and breakdown of the cartilage on the underside of the kneecap (patella). In a healthy knee, this cartilage is smooth and allows the kneecap to glide effortlessly in its groove on the thigh bone as you bend and straighten the knee. When it deteriorates, movement becomes rough, painful, and sometimes produces grinding or clicking sounds.

It is one of the most common causes of knee pain, particularly in young active people, runners, cyclists, and individuals who spend a lot of time on stairs, hills, or in deep bending positions.

What Does It Feel Like?

- A dull, aching pain behind or around the kneecap
- Pain that worsens when going up or down stairs, squatting, or kneeling
- Pain after prolonged sitting with the knee bent — often called the "movie sign"
- A grinding, grating, or crunching sensation (crepitus) when bending the knee
- Stiffness after rest that eases with gentle movement
- Swelling around the kneecap in more severe cases

What Makes It Worse?

- Stairs — especially going downstairs, which generates significant pressure under the kneecap
- Squatting, lunging, or kneeling
- Running, especially downhill
- Prolonged sitting with knees bent
- Cycling with the seat too low
- High-impact activities on hard surfaces

How Did This Happen?

Chondromalacia typically develops from prolonged abnormal pressure or friction on the kneecap cartilage. Contributing factors include:

- Kneecap that sits or tracks slightly off-center in its groove (malalignment)
- Weak inner quadriceps muscles (VMO) that fail to properly guide the patella
- Tight IT band, hip flexors, or lateral structures that pull the kneecap outward
- Overpronation of the foot — which causes the knee to rotate inward
- Sudden increase in activity level without adequate preparation
- Prior injury or direct trauma to the kneecap

When Should I Be Concerned?

- Significant swelling or warmth around the knee joint
- Pain at rest or at night that is constant and unrelenting
- Locking or giving way of the knee
- Symptoms that worsen progressively despite activity modification

The Good News

Chondromalacia responds very well to physical therapy. By strengthening the quadriceps (particularly the inner quad muscle), stretching tight structures, improving hip strength and alignment, and modifying activity, most patients achieve significant and lasting pain relief. Cartilage has limited ability to regenerate, but proper muscle control dramatically reduces the stress placed on it.

Most patients experience significant pain relief within **6 to 10 weeks** of targeted physical therapy.

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