

## UNDERSTANDING BURSITIS

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A **bursa** is a thin, slippery sac found around a joint that releases lubrication called synovial fluid. Its primary function is to provide cushioning between bone and surrounding soft tissue, such as skin, muscles, ligaments and tendons. Under normal circumstances, the **bursa** provides a smooth surface that allows for minimal friction with movement between these structures.

The term "**bursitis**" refers to any inflammation or irritation of the **bursa**. When this occurs, the **bursa** loses its gliding capabilities, and becomes thickened and swollen. As a result, the added size of the swollen **bursa** causes more friction within an already confined space, and the smooth gliding **bursa** becomes gritty and rough.

There are approximately 160 **bursae** in the body. Fortunately, only a handful of them usually develop **bursitis**. The most common areas to get **bursitis** include the shoulder, elbow, hip and knee regions. Less frequently, **bursitis** may also occur in the wrist, buttocks, heel and big toe. Symptoms of **bursitis** include pain, swelling, and tenderness in the affected region. This may also be accompanied by reduced range of motion and strength which can lead to a significant decrease in physical functioning.



There are several factors that can contribute to the development of **bursitis**. Activities that result in repetitive overuse or prolonged and excessive pressure on a body region are a common culprit. An example of this would be constant overhead lifting using your shoulders or continuous kneeling on a hard surface with your knees. A **bursa** can also become injured as a result of a blunt trauma or fall such as slipping on ice and landing on your hip. **Bursitis** is more common in adults, especially in those over 40 years of age. As soft tissues age they become less elastic and durable, making them more susceptible to overuse and traumatic injuries. Other possible causes and risk factors for developing **bursitis** which may require additional medical management include infection from an opening on the skin surface, rheumatoid arthritis, gout, and diabetes.

Conservative self-care strategies for reducing the pain of **bursitis** should initially involve relative rest from any painful activities and ice application. Altering or eliminating the situations that contributed to the **bursitis** is also important. This may include activity modification such as using the correct technique, tools, and/or equipment. In addition, taking breaks to relax overworked muscles and joints, and performing exercises to strengthen the body can also be effective.

**Bursitis** that does not respond to self-care strategies may require professional treatment. This can include acupuncture, laser therapy, and electrotherapeutic modalities to decrease pain; manual and soft tissue therapy to assist with healing and restoring ranges of motion; and specific rehabilitative exercise training for the affected muscles and joints.



If you are having difficulty with a case of **bursitis**, a qualified health professional can prescribe appropriate therapy and rehabilitation strategies specifically for your circumstance. For more information, visit [www.nhwc.ca](http://www.nhwc.ca).

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