Knee swelling, ultrasound and treatment choices

Patient information | General educational guidance

What does swelling mean?

A swollen knee may reflect increased fluid in or around the joint, an injury, an inflammatory process or another cause. The underlying reason cannot be decided solely from an ultrasound photograph.

When to seek urgent help

Get urgent medical assessment for an acutely hot, very painful or swollen joint, particularly with fever, feeling unwell or inability to weight bear. A suspected infection needs rapid evaluation.

Where ultrasound may help

Ultrasound can visualise some joint recesses, superficial fluid collections, tendons and bursae, and can sometimes assist aspiration or injections. Imaging is not routinely recommended for typical osteoarthritis diagnosis or follow-up.

Treatment approaches

- A clinical assessment and appropriate therapeutic exercise are key in osteoarthritis care.
- Education and appropriate activity pacing can support confidence and recovery.
- In selected cases medication or injections may be considered after a discussion of benefits and risks.
- NICE recommends against intra-articular hyaluronan injections for osteoarthritis and notes that corticosteroid injections, when considered, generally offer short-term relief.

Evidence

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) (2022) Osteoarthritis in over 16s: diagnosis and management. NG226. https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng226/chapter/recommendations

General information only. This information does not replace individual clinical advice.
medical advice.