

KNEE INJURIES

With the football season almost upon us and players level of fitness not probably at their best, we will be seeing a steady stream of injured players over the next few weeks.

The commonest joint to be injured in football is the knee due to the amount of twisting and turning involved in the sport.

Many players' careers have been cut short by a significant injury to the knee, or have never really got back to their previous level of skill and fitness. So what should a player do if he sustains a knee injury?

Essentially the quicker the pain and swelling develop, the more serious the injury. If a player is carried off the field, things are not looking good! It can still be serious if the swelling comes on after you have cooled down, and even swelling the next day can indicate a significant injury.

Rest and early application of ice to the knee is essential when swelling is present (NOT HEAT). The quicker it is applied after injury the better, as this can prevent further soft tissue damage.

The structures within the knee most commonly injured in football are the anterior cruciate ligament, which is probably the most serious injury, the cartilage (or meniscus) that can be torn, and the medial collateral ligament which is a big ligament that runs along the inside of the knee.

Most of these injuries are caused by a twisting action on a bent knee, and no one will forget Michael Owen's knee injury in Germany this summer when he landed awkwardly on it and it appeared to 'pop-out' rupturing his cruciate ligament. Ligaments are non elastic, but are very strong, they are the primary stabilisers of a joint and, therefore, very important.

They can only stretch by about 5% of their length, before they tear. A ligament injury can be Graded from I to III, depending on severity, Grade 1 being minor and III being a complete rupture of the ligament.

Once a ligament injury has been sustained it is essential that the muscles around the joint are strengthened, to try and compensate for the injury. Muscles waste very

quickly in response to pain and swelling, and if they are not correctly strengthened the knee will never be quite right and the player is then more likely to re-injure the knee.

Ligaments heal slowly and minor injuries can take up to six weeks to heal. More significant injuries, particularly complete ruptures, may require surgical intervention and it can then be 6 months before the knee is fully rehabilitated.

Cartilage tears although not painful can cause the knee to lock, or feel not 'quite right.' Once a piece of cartilage has been torn, it cannot mend itself and so a scan and then surgery may need to be carried out.

Always seek professional advice after a knee injury, however minor, and be prepared to work at rehabilitating the knee fully, before returning to the football, with appropriate exercises.

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