

Medial (MCL) & Lateral (LCL) Collateral Ligament Injuries of the Knee

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The medial and lateral collateral ligaments (MCL and LCL) are stabilizing structures on the inner and outer sides of the knee that connect the femur (thigh bone) to the lower leg. They prevent abnormal side-to-side motion and shifting of the tibia with respect to the femur and provide stability with twisting, turning and pivoting type activities.

The medial collateral ligament is one of the most commonly injured structures around the knee. People usually injure the MCL through a contact injury when the knee is struck from the outside (lateral side). Injuries to the MCL occur often in contact sports such as football, hockey and soccer. Injuries to the lateral side of the knee are much less common and often involve more severe trauma to the knee.

The signs of a significant knee injury that may include an injury to the collateral ligaments are pain and difficulty walking after injury. Swelling of the knee, pain with motion and a sense that the knee will give out are signs of a knee injury that should be further evaluated by a health care provider. Initial treatment often includes ice, a knee immobilizer to limit knee motion, anti-inflammatory medications and crutches. Sports activities should not be resumed until you are evaluated by a sports medicine physician or an orthopedic surgeon. During your evaluation, the doctor will examine your knee to determine if there is abnormal movement indicating a torn collateral ligament. Your doctor may order further tests of the knee (xrays, MRI) to help evaluate your injury.

Isolated MCL injuries are usually treated without surgery. Your doctor may recommend a hinged knee brace to limit side-to-side motion of the knee to allow the injured tissue to heal. Your doctor will also typically recommend a course of rehabilitation with a physical therapist. Sometimes when the MCL is severely injured or damaged in combination with other structures of the knee, surgery may be necessary. Isolated LCL injuries occur rarely and are often combined with injuries to other structures around the knee. Mild injuries may be amenable to nonoperative treatment including brace wear and rehabilitation exercises. More severe LCL injuries or LCL injuries in combination with other ligament injuries often require surgical treatment. After any surgery, there is a rehabilitation period to work on regaining your knee motion, strengthen your leg and allow the tissue to heal. The recovery period usually lasts between six and 12 months.