

Orthopaedic Connection

Baker's Cyst

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Transforming patient information into patient understanding.

Orthopaedics is filled with conditions named after people. A surprising number of my patients have heard of Baker's cyst.

They know it has something to do with swelling behind the knee, but then things get a little fuzzy.

Before I describe it in more detail you should be asking, "Who was Baker?" Answer: William Baker was a British surgeon who described the condition in 1877.

What Is It really?

A Baker's cyst is a fluid filled sac located in the back of the knee. Doctors refer to the area as the Popliteal Fossa.

It may originate from the hamstring tendons crossing the back of the knee. It may also form as a cystic sac that communicates with the knee joint cavity.

What Causes It?

It often happens without any known cause. However, most patients have an underlying condition such as torn cartilage or arthritis in the knee. Excess fluid forms in the knee joint and eventually finds its way through a small channel to form a Baker's cyst.

Symptoms

Swelling and tenderness are common complaints. Stiffness is often mentioned. Pain is present as the cyst expands in size. It often becomes more tolerable as the cyst reaches a stable size.

Exam

I can often diagnose a Baker's cyst by simply looking at the back of the knee as the patient stands. Knee motion can be restricted or it may be normal.

I always take plain x-rays of the knee looking for arthritis changes. Special studies such as Ultrasound or MRI can be helpful in making the diagnosis. A blood clot (thrombophlebitis, DVT) can be present instead of a Baker's cyst.

Treatment

I often will aspirate the cyst if it is causing a lot of pain or discomfort. Most of the time the cyst is caused by something abnormal going on in the knee itself and the cyst is only there secondarily. By treating the knee condition, typically arthroscopically, and aspirating

the cystic fluid in the back at the time of surgery, the problem is corrected.

Danger

It is my job to figure out if the swelling and pain is really a Baker's cyst. A blood clot (DVT) or tumor has to be considered as these are much more serious conditions that can also mimic a Baker's cyst.

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Website, Your Orthopaedic Connection, Archive of all previous GCH articles.

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Dr. Haverbush