SYMPTOM

Hip pain in adults

Hip pain is discomfort felt in or around the hip joint, groin, or buttock.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Aching, sharp, stiff, or sore with movement

WHERE IT IS FELT
Groin, outer hip, buttock, thigh, or sometimes knee

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Muscle strain, osteoarthritis, irritated outer-hip tendons

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Fever with a hot, swollen hip or inability to bear weight

USUALLY LASTS
Days to months, based on injury, inflammation, or joint disease

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Pain persists two weeks, recurs, or limits sleep or walking

Overview

Hip pain can come from the hip joint or from nearby muscles, tendons, and fluid-filled cushions called bursae. Pain from the lower back can also travel into the buttock or hip area. Sometimes a hip problem causes pain mainly in the thigh or knee.

Where the pain is felt can offer clues, but location alone cannot identify the cause. Groin pain is more often linked to the joint itself. Pain over the outer hip commonly involves nearby tendons. Buttock pain may come from muscles, the joint, or the lower back.

Most hip pain is not an emergency. Mild pain after unusual activity often improves with simple care. Pain that is severe, follows an injury, or occurs with fever needs quicker assessment.

What it may feel or look like

Hip pain may be dull, aching, burning, or sharp. It may be constant or appear only when you walk, climb stairs, bend, run, or lie on one side.

You may also notice:

A painless click is often not harmful. Clicking with pain, locking, or loss of movement is more

useful to mention at an appointment.

- Stiffness after resting or first thing in the morning
- Reduced movement, such as difficulty putting on socks
- Tenderness over the outer hip
- Clicking, catching, or a feeling that the hip may give way
- A limp or difficulty putting weight on the leg
- Pain that travels into the thigh, knee, buttock, or lower back

Common causes

Common causes include muscle or tendon strains, especially after exercise, lifting, or a sudden change in activity. Tendons around the outer hip can also become irritated. This is often called greater trochanteric pain syndrome and may hurt when walking, climbing stairs, or lying on that side.

Osteoarthritis is another common cause, particularly later in adulthood. It happens when the joint gradually changes over time. It can cause groin or thigh pain, stiffness, and reduced movement. Symptoms may come and go rather than worsen steadily.

Pain may also be referred from the lower back. "Referred" means the pain is felt somewhere other than where it starts. Back-related pain may occur with tingling, numbness, or pain running down the leg.

Less common causes include inflammatory arthritis, a tear in the cartilage rim around the joint, and osteonecrosis, where part of the hip bone loses its blood supply. Stress fractures are small bone cracks caused by repeated loading. These may occur without a major fall.

Urgent causes include a broken hip after an injury and infection within the joint. These are less common but need prompt medical assessment.

When to seek medical care

Seek same-day medical care if you have:

Call emergency services after a major injury if the hip or leg looks deformed, you cannot move safely, or the foot becomes cold, pale, blue, or numb. Do not try to straighten a visibly deformed leg.

Arrange a routine appointment if pain lasts longer than about two weeks despite self-care,

keeps returning, interrupts sleep, or limits walking and daily activities. Also book an appointment for ongoing stiffness, a persistent limp, or pain that is gradually becoming more troublesome.

- Fever or feel unwell with a hot, swollen, or very painful hip
- Sudden severe pain or an unexpected inability to bear weight
- Significant pain after a fall, especially with fragile bones
- Rapidly increasing swelling, redness, or loss of movement

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask where the pain is, when it began, and what makes it better or worse. They may ask about injuries, exercise, fever, back symptoms, other joint problems, and medicines such as steroids like prednisone or hydrocortisone .

The examination may include watching you walk and checking movement, strength, and tender areas. Your back and knee may also be examined because problems there can feel like hip pain.

Tests are not always needed. An X-ray can look for a fracture or joint changes. Ultrasound or MRI may be considered when a tendon injury, stress fracture, cartilage problem, or another condition is suspected. Blood tests may help if infection or inflammatory arthritis is possible.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause, how severe the pain is, and how it affects you. For mild pain without warning signs, temporarily reduce activities that clearly worsen it, but avoid prolonged bed rest. Gentle movement within a comfortable range can help prevent stiffness.

A cold pack wrapped in a towel may ease pain after a recent strain. Heat may feel better for ongoing stiffness. Protect your skin and limit each application to a short period.

Supportive footwear and pacing longer walks may reduce strain. A physiotherapist can suggest exercises to improve hip strength, flexibility, and balance. If body weight is adding to joint strain, gradual weight management may help, but exercise and care should still be adapted to your abilities.

Non-prescription pain medicines may help some people. Follow the label and ask a pharmacist or clinician what is suitable if you have other health conditions, take other medicines, or are pregnant. Anti-inflammatory medicines are not appropriate for everyone.

Persistent problems may need targeted physiotherapy, an injection, or specialist assessment. Surgery is reserved for certain injuries or joint conditions when other treatment is unsuitable or has not provided enough relief.

What to expect

A mild strain may improve over days to several weeks. Irritated outer-hip tendons can take longer and may flare when activity increases too quickly.

Osteoarthritis and some other joint conditions are long term, but symptoms often fluctuate. Exercise, activity changes, pain relief, and other treatments can improve movement and day-to-day comfort. Recovery after a fracture, infection, or surgery depends on the specific condition and your general health.

Common questions

Can hip pain actually come from my back?

Yes. Irritated joints or nerves in the lower back can cause pain in the buttock, outer hip, or leg. Numbness, tingling, back pain, or pain extending below the knee may make a back-related cause more likely.

Is it safe to exercise?

Gentle activity is usually reasonable when pain is mild and there are no warning signs. Reduce movements that cause sharp or increasing pain. Stop and seek advice if exercise causes major swelling, weakness, or difficulty bearing weight.

Why does my hip hurt in bed?

Outer-hip tendon irritation often hurts when you lie directly on the affected side. Joint and back problems may also disturb sleep. A pillow between your knees may improve comfort, but persistent night pain should be discussed at a routine appointment.

Does clicking mean the joint is damaged?

Not necessarily. Tendons can move over nearby structures and create a painless click. Clicking that is painful, causes locking, or follows an injury should be assessed.

Sources

- NHS. Hip pain in adults
- National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. Osteoarthritis in over 16s: diagnosis and management, NICE guideline NG226
- American College of Radiology. ACR Appropriateness Criteria: Chronic Hip Pain
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- American Family Physician. Hip Pain in Adults: Evaluation and Differential Diagnosis, 2021;103(2):81-89