

Common Knee Injuries From Car Accidents

How a Collision Can Cause Serious and Lasting Knee Damage

The knee can be especially vulnerable in a car accident because a driver or passenger may strike the dashboard or other parts of the vehicle as the body moves during a collision. That impact can happen in a fraction of a second, before the occupant has any chance to brace for it.

Knee injuries from car accidents range from bruising that fades within weeks to structural damage that requires surgery and months of rehabilitation. When pain appears hours or days after a collision, a [Walnut Creek car accident lawyer](#) can help determine how the injury may affect a claim and what evidence can connect it to the crash.

Dashboard Knee

One of the most common knee injuries in a frontal collision happens when the knee strikes the dashboard directly. This impact can fracture the kneecap, damage the cartilage behind it, or drive the top of the shin bone backward against the thigh bone hard enough to injure the ligaments holding the joint together.

- **Patellar Fracture:** A break in the kneecap itself, ranging from a hairline crack to a fracture severe enough to require surgical repair.
- **Chondral Damage:** Injury to the smooth cartilage lining the back of the kneecap, which can lead to chronic pain and early arthritis if left untreated.
- **Posterior Cruciate Ligament Injury:** Damage to the ligament that normally prevents the shin bone from sliding backward, often caused by the exact motion of the knee slamming into the dashboard.

This combination of injuries is sometimes referred to informally as dashboard knee, and the full extent of the injury may not be apparent at the scene because pain and swelling can develop or worsen afterward.

Ligament Tears

Sudden twisting or bending forces during a crash can tear the ligaments that hold the knee joint stable, even without any direct impact to the knee itself. Some ligament injuries may initially feel manageable, with pain, swelling, or instability becoming more apparent in the hours after a crash.

- **Anterior Cruciate Ligament Tear:** A tear in the ligament that helps prevent the shin bone from moving too far forward relative to the thigh bone, sometimes accompanied by a popping sensation at the moment of injury.

- **Medial Collateral Ligament Tear:** Damage to the ligament along the inner side of the knee, typically caused by side-impact forces that push the knee outward.
- **Lateral Collateral Ligament Tear:** Injury to the ligament along the outer side of the knee, less common but still seen in certain crash configurations.

A torn ligament does not always cause immediate, disabling pain, which is exactly why it can be dismissed as minor at the scene before an MRI later reveals a significant tear that may require extensive rehabilitation or reconstructive surgery.

Meniscus Tears

The meniscus is the cushion of cartilage that sits between the thigh bone and shin bone, and it can tear when the knee is twisted or compressed during a crash. Some meniscus tears can heal or improve with nonsurgical treatment, while others may require arthroscopic surgery to repair or remove damaged tissue. The appropriate treatment and recovery timeline depend on the location and severity of the tear and the patient's symptoms.

- **Acute Traumatic Tear:** A sudden tear caused directly by the twisting or compressive forces of the collision itself.
- **Locking or Catching Sensations:** A torn piece of cartilage can shift within the joint, causing the knee to catch, lock, or give way unexpectedly during ordinary movement.
- **Delayed Swelling:** Fluid buildup in the joint that may not appear until a day or two after the crash, long after an initial ER visit has already concluded.

Kneecap Dislocation

A forceful, sideways impact to the knee during a crash can push the kneecap out of its normal groove entirely. This injury is usually obvious immediately, since the joint often looks visibly deformed and the pain is severe.

- **Complete Dislocation:** The kneecap moves entirely out of alignment, requiring manual repositioning, often in an emergency room setting.
- **Partial Subluxation:** The kneecap shifts partway out of place and back again, which can still cause significant ligament damage even without a full dislocation.
- **Recurrent Instability:** A prior kneecap dislocation can increase the risk of recurrent instability or another dislocation, particularly when supporting structures have been damaged.

A dislocated kneecap frequently comes with damage to the supporting ligaments and cartilage, which means the visible injury at the scene is often only part of the full picture.

Why These Injuries Are So Often Underestimated at First

Knee injuries share a frustrating pattern after a car accident. Adrenaline masks pain in the first hours, swelling takes time to build, and many people are focused on more visibly dramatic injuries in the immediate aftermath of a crash. By the time the knee pain becomes impossible to ignore, days may have passed since the accident.

That delay matters for more than just physical recovery. Insurance adjusters may use a gap between the date of the crash and the date a knee injury is formally diagnosed as a reason to argue the injury was unrelated to the collision.

What a Knee Injury Diagnosis Actually Requires

A basic X-ray can identify fractures and other bone or joint abnormalities, but it does not provide the same view of soft tissues such as ligaments and the meniscus. An MRI may be used when a doctor suspects a ligament tear, meniscus injury, cartilage damage, or other internal knee injury.

- **Physical Examination:** A doctor tests the knee's stability through specific maneuvers designed to reveal ligament laxity that an X-ray alone cannot show.
- **MRI Imaging:** Provides a detailed view of soft tissue structures, including ligaments, cartilage, and the meniscus, that bone imaging cannot capture.
- **Orthopedic Referral:** May be appropriate when an examination or imaging suggests structural damage that requires specialist evaluation or treatment.

Getting a complete diagnosis early does more than guide proper treatment. It also creates contemporaneous medical documentation of the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment, which can become important if the cause or extent of the injury is later disputed.

What Compensation May Be Available for a Knee Injury?

A knee injury from a car accident can cause losses extending well beyond the initial emergency room bill. Depending on the circumstances, a California personal injury claim may seek compensation for both economic and noneconomic losses caused by the injury.

- **Past and Future Medical Expenses:** May include the initial ER visit, diagnostic imaging, orthopedic care, surgery, physical therapy, and future medical care that is reasonably certain to be needed because of the injury.
- **Lost Wages and Diminished Earning Capacity:** Accounts for time missed from work during recovery, as well as any long-term reduction in the ability to perform physically demanding jobs if the knee never fully regains its prior strength or range of motion.
- **Pain and Suffering:** Compensates for the physical pain of the injury itself along with the disruption to daily life, from walking and climbing stairs to activities the person could do easily before the crash.

- **Loss of Enjoyment of Life:** Recognizes that a knee injury can permanently limit activities like running, hiking, or playing with children in ways that go beyond medical bills or missed paychecks.
- **Future Medical Care:** May include the reasonable cost of future treatment, rehabilitation, or surgery when the evidence shows that such care is reasonably certain to be needed because of the injury.

Recovering these damages requires evidence connecting the claimed losses to the crash, which is why a knee injury diagnosed days later should be supported by a clear medical record documenting the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment.

We Refuse to Settle for Less

Knee injuries from a car accident can carry long-term consequences that may not be fully apparent when an insurance company first offers a settlement, including future treatment, physical therapy, and lasting limitations on mobility. [Clancy & Diaz, LLP](#) has spent years fighting for accident victims across Walnut Creek, Antioch, Benicia, Brentwood, and Pittsburg, working with medical experts to make sure a serious knee injury is properly documented and fully valued rather than dismissed as minor because it was not immediately obvious at the scene. Our case results include \$2.6 million for an auto accident victim.

If you were injured in a car accident and your knee pain didn't show up until after the adrenaline wore off, don't let an insurance company use that timing against you. [Contact us](#) for a free consultation, and let a team that goes the distance fight for the full value of your recovery.