

Arthroscopy of a Joint

What is arthroscopy?

Arthroscopy is a way of looking inside a joint through a small, lighted tube, called an arthroscope. Arthroscopy is most commonly done in the knee, shoulder, ankle or wrist joints.

Seeing inside the joint can help the surgeon decide what is wrong with the joint. Some common problems that can be seen this way are:

- torn ligaments or tendons
- meniscus or cartilage injuries
- arthritic changes
- small bone chips

Some of these can be fixed through the arthroscope. If this is not possible you may need further surgery.

How is an arthroscopy done?

The surgeon makes one or more small incisions about 1 to 2 cm (1/4 to 1/2 inch) long around your joint. One incision is used for the arthroscope. Other incisions are used for the instruments to repair any damage in the joint.

In the operating room you will be given a general or a spinal anaesthetic. The anesthesiologist and your surgeon will decide the kind of anaesthetic you will have. For general anesthetic you sleep during the surgery. For spinal anesthetic you are awake during the surgery, but will not feel pain from the waist down. You may have medication to help you relax as well.

How long does this surgery take?

The length of time needed for the surgery depends on what the doctor needs to do to your joint.

Before surgery

Ask your surgeon what activities you should do or not do before surgery. Some patients need to avoid or limit activities that may cause pain or swelling in the joint. Ask your surgeon for a referral to an occupational therapist if you are having trouble doing your activities of daily living due to pain.

If you are having an arthroscopy to your leg you may need to use crutches or a cane after surgery. Ask your doctor before your surgery if you will need crutches or a cane.

Take a bath or shower the night before or the morning of your surgery. Wash the area of your surgery well with soap and water. If you have been given a special sponge, follow the instructions you were given.

You must not eat or drink anything after midnight the night before or at least 8 hours before your surgery. ✘ Do not suck on candy or chew gum. Ask your doctor about taking your usual medications.

What to expect after an arthroscopy

You will go to the recovery area. You will stay in recovery for a short time. Then you will be taken to the Day Surgery Unit before you go home.

How will I feel after an arthroscopy?

You may have some pain or discomfort after surgery. This should not be severe and should be controlled by the medication your doctor orders. Tell the nurse when you have pain. The nurse will let you know how often you can have pain control medication.

It is normal to have:

- some pain
- feelings of tightness
- swelling

Ask your doctor about taking pain control medication at home.

What activity can I do after surgery?

Your surgeon or physiotherapist will tell you what activity or exercise you can do.

If you had leg arthroscopy, you may need to use a cane or crutches. You will be shown how to use the cane or crutches before you go home.

How long will I be in hospital?

Most people go home the same day. Ask your doctor if you will need to stay in hospital longer.

What plans should I make for going home?

You will need to arrange for someone to drive you home. Ask your doctor when you can drive.

How do I care for my incisions?

Your incisions may be closed with stitches or surgical tape and covered with a bandage or dressing. Your bandage or dressing keeps your incisions clean and prevents infection. Leave your dressing on until your doctor tells you to remove it.

Keep your incisions dry and clean. Ask your doctor when you can shower or bath.

How can I relieve pain and swelling?

You may use a wrapped ice pack for up to 10 minutes at a time. Wrap the ice pack with a towel before you put it on the joint. Wrapping keeps the incision(s) dry and prevents frostbite.

After you apply an ice pack for 10 minutes, you must wait at least 1 hour before you put the ice pack on again.

You can apply an ice pack several times a day to decrease pain and swelling. Make sure you wait 1 hour before you apply the pack again.

Follow-up with your surgeon

You will be given a follow-up appointment to see your surgeon before you leave the hospital. **If you were not given an appointment, call the surgeon's office to arrange one after you are home.**

You may be given photos or a CD (DVD) taken of the inside of your joint during the surgery. Please bring these to your doctor's appointment.

Call your doctor if you notice:

- pain that gets worse after the second day
- any incision becomes red, hot, or swollen
- a fever
- numbness or a change in feeling

