

**Medical Collateral Ligament (MCL) Sprains**

**Common Questions**



**More information can be found on  
Dr. Stetson's website at [www.sportsmedicinedr.com](http://www.sportsmedicinedr.com)**



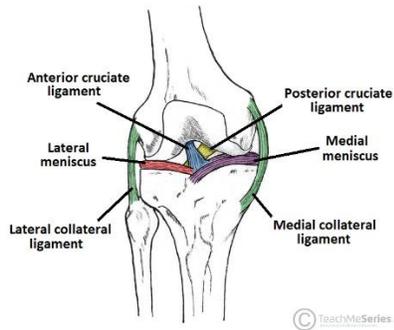
**What is the medial collateral ligament?**

Your knee ligaments connect your thighbone to your lower leg bones. The medial collateral ligament or MCL is found on the inside part of your knee and lateral collateral ligament or LCL is found on the outside of your knee.

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### **What does the medial collateral ligament do?**

The MCL or medial collateral ligament controls the sideways motion of your knee and braces it against unusual movement.

### **How common are medial collateral ligament or MCL tears or sprains?**

Because the knee joint relies just on these ligaments and surrounding muscles for stability, it is easily injured and it is the most common ligament injury of the knee.



### **What are the causes of MCL tears or sprains?**

Any direct contact to the knee or hard muscle contraction such as changing direction rapidly while running can injure a knee ligament. Injuries to the collateral ligaments are usually caused by a force that pushes the knee sideways. These are often contact injuries, but not always. Medial collateral ligament tears often occur as a result of a direct blow to the outside of the knee. This pushes the knee inwards toward the other knee.

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**Are there different types of MCL tears?**

Injured ligaments are considered "sprains" and are graded on a severity scale from one to three. With a grade 1 sprain, the ligament is mildly damaged and it has been slightly stretched, but is still able to help keep the knee joint stable. A grade 2 sprain stretches the ligament to the point where it becomes loose. This is often referred to as a partial tear of the ligament. Finally, a grade 3 sprain is most commonly referred to as a complete tear of the ligament. The ligament has been split into two pieces, and the knee joint is unstable.



**What are the symptoms of an MCL tear?**

If there is an MCL injury, the pain is on the inside of the knee and there may be a feeling that your knee is giving way.

**Can an MCL injury occur with other knee injuries?**

The MCL can be injured with other ligaments and parts of the knee including the ACL, the meniscus, and the articular cartilage of the knee joint. Most commonly the MCL will be injured along with the ACL or anterior cruciate ligament and also with the meniscus.

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**Do I have to have surgery on my knee for an MCL sprain or tear?**

Injuries to the MCL rarely require surgery. Nonsurgical treatment is effective for most injuries to the MCL.

**Will the MCL tear or sprain heal on its own?**

Yes. Most isolated MCL sprains will heal on their own.

**Is it possible to make a full recovery from an MCL injury?**

Depending on the grade or type of tear you have, most patients return to normal activities of daily living within one to two weeks after their injury. For sports, it may take four to six weeks before you are able to return to certain sports that require running and cutting. Almost everyone who has an MCL injury makes a complete recovery.

**What will the doctor do during my first examination for an MCL injury?**

During your first visit, your doctor will talk to you about your symptoms and medical history. He will also ask you questions about your activity level and what activities you enjoy doing and what activities are important to you. During the physical examination, your doctor will check all the structures of your injured knee, and compare them to your non-injured knee.



**Do I need an x-ray of my knee for an MCL injury?**

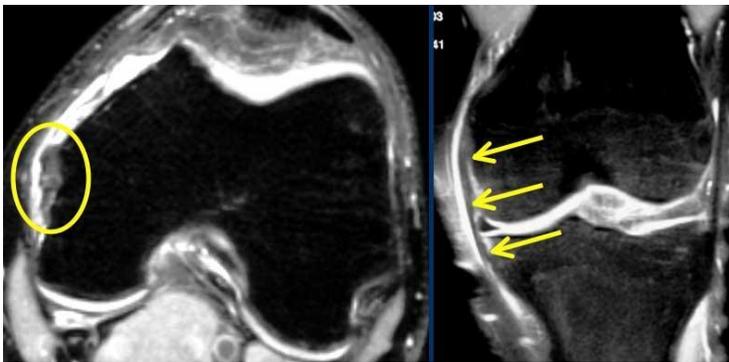
Although an x-ray will not show any injury to your MCL, x-rays can show whether the injury is associated with a broken bone. It can also show your alignment of your bones which can be important if surgery is done in the future and also if you have any arthritis in your knee. Also, if you are younger and still growing, your growth plates may be open and this can also be seen by x-ray.

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**Do I need an MRI for an MCL injury?**

A magnetic resonance imaging or MRI scan creates better images of soft tissues like the meniscus and the ligaments of the knee. It is very helpful in helping to diagnose an MCL tear.



**How is an MCL sprain or tear treated?**

Icing your injury is important in the healing process. The proper way to ice an injury is to use crushed ice directly to the injured area for 15 to 20 minutes at a time, with at least 1 hour between icing sessions. Your knee must be protected from the same sideways force that caused the injury and this is done with a brace. You may need to change your daily activities to avoid risky movements such as twisting or pivoting. To further protect your knee, you may be given crutches to keep you from putting weight on your leg in the early phase of treatment.

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**What type of brace is recommended for MCL injuries?**

Most isolated MCL injuries are treated with a hinged knee sleeve which has hinges on both sides of the knee joint to keep it stable and protect it from side-to-side motions. This type of brace is usually recommended not only during the rehabilitation process but also when athletes return to sports to help protect the knee from further injury.

**How long will it take for an MCL sprain or tear to heal?**

For grade one sprains, these will typically heal within one week. For grade two sprains, they may take two to four weeks to heal. A grade three sprain can take anywhere from four to eight weeks to heal.



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**Will I need physical therapy for an MCL sprain?**

Your doctor may suggest physical therapy in order to regain motion and strength in your knee. Specific exercises will restore function to your knee and strengthen the leg muscles that support it.



**Do MCL tears ever require surgery?**

Most isolated medial collateral ligament injuries can be successfully treated without surgery. If the medial collateral ligament is torn in such a way that it cannot heal or is associated with other ligament injuries, your doctor may suggest surgery to repair it.



**When can I return to sports after an MCL sprain?**

Depending on the grade or type of tear you have, most patients return to normal activities of daily living within one to two weeks after their injury. For sports, it may take four to six weeks before you are able to return to certain sports that require running and cutting.

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**Are there any complications associated with untreated MCL injuries?**

If an MCL injury is not treated properly, the knee may become loose or feel unstable. This can make it hard to return to sports or other activities because the knee will buckle or give way with certain movements. This can cause more damage to not only the MCL but other parts of the knee.

**How can I differentiate between an MCL and an LCL injury?**

The MCL is on the inside part of the knee and is injured much more commonly than the LCL which is on the outside part of the knee. Depending on how the knee is injured will give the first clue to whether it is the medial or lateral collateral ligament that is injured. If the MCL is injured, the pain will be present on the inside part of the knee whereas for an LCL injury, the pain will be on the outside part of the knee.

**Are there specialists who deal with tears of the MCL?**

Yes, there are knee specialists who deal with MCL tears. They are orthopaedic surgeons who have done additional training or what is called a fellowship in sports medicine or arthroscopy.

**Is Dr. Stetson a knee specialist?**

Yes, Dr. Stetson is a knee specialist and he is fellowship trained in sports medicine which includes these types of injuries. Yes, Dr. Stetson is a knee specialist and he is fellowship trained in sports medicine which includes knee MCL injuries and surgery. He has over 25 years of experience in arthroscopic knee surgery and sports medicine. He is pictured here with one of his patients, United States Olympic Volleyball Player Donald Suxho. Dr. Stetson is one of the team physicians for the US Olympic Volleyball Teams!

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**What if I have any other questions?**

If you have any other questions, more information can be found on Dr. Stetson's website at [www.sportsmedicinedr.com](http://www.sportsmedicinedr.com) or just call Dr. Stetson's office, we are always happy to answer any questions you may have.



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