

Getting the whole picture: Outpatient surgery Focus on knee surgery

Medical technology has advanced dramatically over the years, enabling physicians and medical professionals to treat more patients in a much less invasive manner. For example, the total number of knee surgery claims at Blue Cross continues to increase, with the biggest jump coming from children under the age of 18 – surgeries for young men and women increased 16.8 and 10.4 percent, respectively, from 1998-2000.

Let's take a look at one common procedure: repairing a torn meniscus (cartilage) in the knee joint using an arthroscope. Often associated with athletics, the prevalence of this injury is skyrocketing, as more youngsters participate in soccer, basketball, hockey and other strenuous sports. Twenty years ago a torn meniscus would have either been treated in a limited way with only rest and physical therapy or, if they were fortunate, with an open surgical procedure requiring a hospital stay and long recovery time — in either case their sports career was over and they likely endured significant pain, locking of the joint, and the discomfort of a knee brace for the rest of their life.

Let's take the case of a 17-year old girl who tears her meniscus in a basketball game today. Here is a likely scenario:

- Day 1: She injures the knee during a game. She visits the local emergency room, getting an exam and x-ray that reveals some damage to her meniscus
- Day 6: After the swelling subsides, she attempts some light rehab with a physical therapist
- Day 7: She has an MRI done; The MRI and further exam reveal torn cartilage
- Day 20: She is referred to an orthopedic surgeon for a pre-op physical and lab work
- Day 30: She has outpatient arthroscopic surgery to repair meniscus; needing special exercise devices, cold pads, and prescription drugs to control the swelling and aid in healing
- Day 35: She begins rehab for the knee (several times a week for four months)
- Day 45: Follow-up exam and x-ray of knee
- Day 140: Exam of knee
- Day 150: She completes rehab
- Day 180: Exam of knee
- Day 210: Final exam; she gets a special knee brace to train for the upcoming season

Total cost: \$20,600

Unlike the person 20 years ago, this young woman is able to get back to basketball in time to play the next season. However, the increase in these procedures also contributes to increasing health care costs. Add in surgical complications, ACL repairs, knee replacements, drug utilization, etc., and it's easy to see how overall costs are skyrocketing.

And because the young woman in our scenario is competing again, she's at an even higher risk of having additional problems and/or re-injuring the knee — some teenage girls are on their third or fourth knee surgery before graduating high school. And medical studies have shown that young adults with knee injuries are at considerably higher risk for osteoarthritis later in life.

Medical advances such as these help improve our quality of life, but it does cost, driving up premiums.

