

A pain in the groin?



Groin pain is common among sportsmen and women. Often it can be persistent, improving with rest but recurring on return to sport. However, with the correct diagnosis, modern treatment can usually solve the problem.

Dr Jason Brockwell, Hip surgeon

The groin is the area between the upper thigh and the lower abdomen, and a number of problems may arise there.

Until recently, most groin pain was thought to be due either to herniae or muscle strains. Now subtle hip problems have been recognised, as probably the commonest cause of groin pain.

The hip is a ball and socket joint. A 'cam' deformity, where the ball is elliptical, instead of round, is quite common in men. One recent study showed it was present in one quarter of Canadian men. When the bone is this shape, it is as if an oval peg is forced into a round hole every time the hip is bent, causing damage, then pain, and finally arthritis.

Accurate diagnosis critical

This problem, called 'femoro-acetabular impingement' (FAI) can be diagnosed by X-ray, but the X-ray must be specially positioned. Unfortunately, because FAI is only recently recognised and therefore not widely known, most X-rays and MRI

scans are not correctly positioned, and the diagnosis is often missed.

Minimally invasive treatment

FAI can be treated by arthroscopic surgery. An endoscope and special instruments are passed into the hip joint via two tiny incisions in the thigh, allowing the surgeon to diagnose and treat, for example, removing the extra bone on the femoral head-neck junction to restore the normal round shape of the femoral head.

Patients can walk on the day of their procedure, go home the next day, return to office work within a few days and get back to sports training in a few months.

Hip arthroscopic surgery is generally very successful, and usually gets athletes back to their sport and dancers back on stage.

Alex Reiner, a high school baseball pitcher, was diagnosed with FAI when he was 15 and had hip arthroscopy a year later. Alex went on to win a college baseball scholarship in the USA.

"My flexibility and running speed are better than they have ever been," said Mr Reiner.

Other causes of groin pain?

A long list of problems can cause groin pain, some involving the hip joint: such as avascular necrosis of the femoral head, which is common in Asians, and arthritis, which is common in Caucasians; and some not involving the hip joint, such as osteitis pubis (degeneration of the joint between the right and left pubic bones of the pelvis), tendon injuries and tears; and some far away from the hip, such as pain referred to the groin from the back.

Advanced surgical equipment

Hip arthroscopy has been introduced in Hong Kong in the recent decade. State-of-the-art equipment, such as Hong Kong's only Hana operating table (specially designed for hip surgery), and special endoscopes and instruments, and an experienced team at Matilda International Hospital have helped to enhance results in these advanced procedures.



Sport and the hip

Many sports involve forceful bending and twisting of the hip: kicking in martial arts or soccer; lunging in racquet sports and fencing; ice hockey; dance; swimming breaststroke or the 'eggbeater' kick in water polo. Golf and horse riding are also demanding on the hip.



Alex Reiner has returned to sports after recovering from a hip arthroscopy. (Photo by Stephen Goldsmith)



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