

Arthroscopy of the ankle



What is an arthroscopy?

Arthroscopy of the ankle is a surgical technique for looking inside the joint with a small telescope ("keyhole surgery"). It is normally performed under general anaesthetic and allows a good view of the joint and small operations can be carried out through it. It is particularly useful in the diagnosis and treatment of cartilage and ligament problems of the ankle.

The aim of arthroscopic surgery is to correct or assess the mechanical problems within your joint. The surgeon is able to confirm the nature of the injury and may be able to remove or repair the damaged part whilst causing minimal disruption to the joint. In some cases, surgery will not be able to reverse the damage which has already occurred. In the majority of cases the speed of your recovery will be dictated by the degree of damage and how well you can rehabilitate your ankle.

What are the benefits of the procedure?

The keyhole technique of arthroscopy has a lower risk of complications than traditional surgery and usually results in less pain after the procedure, a shorter hospital stay and a quicker recovery (this will be variable dependent on what procedure is undertaken).

How long will I be in hospital for?

This procedure is usually performed as a day case (so you will go home the same day). Rarely, an overnight stay may be required depending on your medical and physical history.

Common findings during arthroscopy

1. Articular cartilage damage (osteochondral defect)
2. Inflammation of joint lining (synovitis)
3. Bone spurs
4. Arthritis

What risks are there involved in the procedure?

- Infection
- Nerve damage – causing numbness and painful scar
- Deep vein thrombosis (DVT) and pulmonary embolism (PE) – blood clots in the vein or lungs – rare
- Swelling
- Residual or recurrent pain

It is beyond the scope of this document to identify all the most extreme (less than one in a thousand) risks that you might be prone to but we will be very happy to discuss any worries about specific concerns and also about any family history or your own personal history of problems in the past which are much more relevant. If there is anything you do not understand or if you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to discuss them with us.

After the operation

You will usually be able to go home when you feel ready. You will need to arrange for someone to drive you home. You should try to have a friend or relative stay with you for the first 24 hours.

Pain - Local anaesthetic is used in the ankle to reduce the chance of you waking in pain. Some pain and swelling is normal after an arthroscopy; you will be advised to take simple painkillers.

Wound care - Your ankle will be bandaged in wool and crepe bandage. Arthroscopy key-hole incisions are about half a centimetre long and are usually closed with a single stitch. The stitches should be removed 12 – 14 days after the operation either at your GP practice or in clinic. In most circumstances, the bandage should be kept on until your stitches are due to be removed.

Walking - You will need to rest your ankle for the first two to three days after your arthroscopy and try to keep your leg elevated as much as possible to prevent swelling. You will be able to walk on the day of your surgery unless advised otherwise. You may mobilise freely around the house but long walks or standing for long periods should be avoided. You may need to use a stick or crutches for a few days (or longer, dependent on the type of surgery performed).

Work - Depending on your job you may return to work after a few days. If you have a sedentary job you should be able to return to work within 7 days. If your job is physical and involves climbing and squatting, you may need to stay off work for up to 2 weeks. More complex procedures will require longer periods of being off work.

Driving / travel - You can get back to driving when you can comfortably manage to walk unaided. You must have sufficient strength to control the foot pedals and be able to perform an emergency stop comfortably. It is advisable to check the terms of your car insurance to ensure your cover is valid, as some policies state that you must not drive for a specific time period after an operation. In general terms, a week from arthroscopy (some procedures will require longer periods off driving).

Recovery period - The length of time taken to notice an improvement in your ankle after arthroscopy varies depending on your condition. For example, after injuries to the cartilage, the muscles alter their function and can take weeks/ months to retrain after arthroscopy.

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