

# Musculoskeletal System

## Luxation of the Patella

The patella or ‘knee cap’ is the small bone that connects the thigh muscles to the bones that comprise the shin, namely the tibia and fibula. The term ‘luxation’ refers to the dislocation of a bone from its normal position. When this happens, it causes pain and lameness, and occurs commonly in small breed dogs, including Westies. In most cases, the patella becomes displaced medially, towards the inside of the leg, rather than laterally (towards the outside of the leg).

While one could easily envision how a traumatic event, like a fall or being hit by a car, could cause dislocation of the patella, in most cases the condition is caused by muscle and skeletal abnormalities present at birth. While the condition can be painful and a cause of lameness, it can be diagnosed and treated effectively in most dogs.

### How does patellar luxation happen?

The bones of the knee joint include the thigh bone (femur), the shin bones (tibia and fibula), and the knee cap (patella), which sits in a groove in the femur called the trochlear groove. Ligaments connect these bones and serve to stabilize the joint. The quadriceps muscles are a set of four muscles on the front of the femur that come together near the patella to form the patellar ligament. This ligament can easily be felt between the patella and a prominence on the tibia (tibial tuberosity) over the front of the knee. The quadriceps muscles serve to extend, or straighten, the knee. During this process, the patella acts as a lever arm for the quadriceps and also exerts an even amount tension from the muscles on the patellar ligament.

Normally functioning knee joints work because all of the components of the knee joint (bones, ligaments, tendons, muscles) are lined up properly. In dogs with congenital patellar luxation, one or more of the components either is malformed, dysfunctional or becomes so as the dog begins to mature. Some dogs may develop this condition later in life, as a result of trauma or a combination of a congenital abnormality and subsequent wear.

Dogs with luxation of the patella typically have one or more of the following abnormalities: abnormal angulation between the head and shaft of the femur, medial displacement of the quadriceps, lateral twisting or bowing of the femur just above the joint, a shallow trochlear groove, or medial displacement of the tibial tuberosity where the patellar ligament attaches. **Figure 4.7** on the following page depicts the differences between a normal dog and one with luxation of the patella. In the normal dog, the patella is positioned under the quadriceps femoris muscle and is attached by the patellar ligament to the tibia. In contrast, in the dog with luxation of the patella, the patella and quadriceps are displaced medially.

There are several theories as to which deformity initiates the problem and results in luxation. The most widely accepted theory is that an abnormal angulation between the head and shaft of the femur causes the quadriceps muscle to move medially and pull the patella with it. There are three other theories for the development of the condition. These include 1) hormonal influences on bone formation and growth that result in development of a shallow trochlear groove in the femur, 2) hip diseases that cause dogs to walk abnormally, making the knee compensate inappropriately, and 3) abnormally positioned attachments of the muscles that cause the patella to be displaced medially. It is important to recognize that no single theory explains all cases. Regardless

### Common Clinical Findings

Small Breed Dogs

Wide Range of Clinical Signs

Abnormalities in Femur or Tibia

Joint Deformities on Radiographs

of the underlying cause for patellar luxation, there are several consequences if the condition is not treated. With the patella out of place, the cartilage on the surface of the patella, tibia and femur wears down, causing pain and restricting movement, eventually leading to arthritis. Other problems that may develop include rupture of the cranial cruciate ligament, one of the important ligaments that attach the femur to the tibia. This ligament can be stretched too far and tear completely if the patella is displaced.

Patellar luxation can result in special consequences in dogs that are still growing. For example, a preexisting bone deformity that may be causing the luxation will worsen as the bones continue to grow unless it is corrected surgically. Similarly, without the normal pressure exerted by the patella on the trochlear groove of the femur, the groove does not deepen as it should. As a result, the groove will become too shallow to retain the patella in position, even if it is popped back into place. Consequently, is very important for an accurate diagnosis to be made and affected dogs receive treatment. This is particularly true for young, growing dogs.

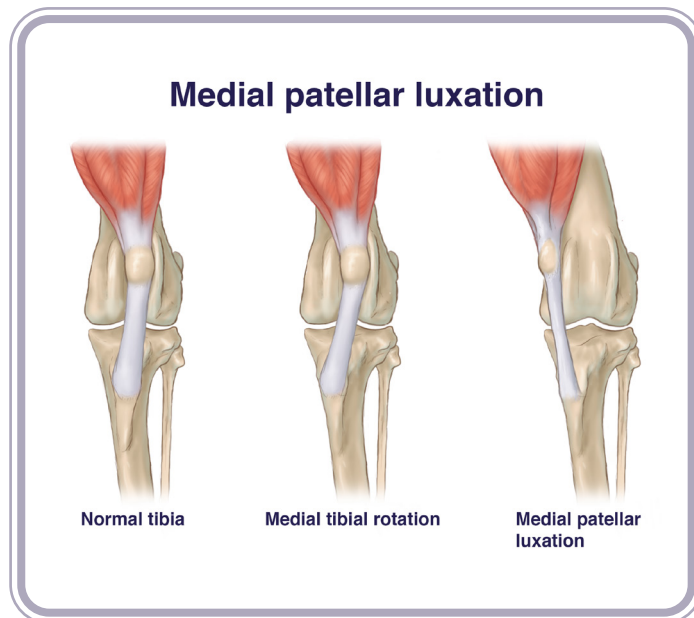
### Signs and Severity of Patellar Luxation

Dogs with luxation of the patella may exhibit a variety of clinical signs, depending on the severity of the problem. To clarify and compare the severity of the condition in different dogs, four grades of severity are used. These range from the mildest, Grade I, to the most severe, Grade IV.

**Grade I:** Luxation of the patella in dogs with Grade I typically is discovered during a routine physical examination. In these cases, the patella can be forced out of place manually, but rarely luxates during the dog's regular daily activity. Because all of the components of the joint are normal, dogs with Grade I luxations will appear normal and are not lame.

**Grade II:** Dogs with a Grade II luxation have a mild underlying deformity of the femur. While the patella may be luxated manually, it occasionally may do so on its own. In some dogs, the patella returns to its normal position as the animal moves. In other dogs, the patella will need to be repositioned manually. Dogs with Grade II luxations will occasionally "skip" while walking or running, when the patella has become displaced. Their gait will return to normal when the patella returns to its normal position.

**Grade III:** Grade III luxations are more severe, causing the patella to remain out of position most of the time. The patella can, however, be repositioned manually. The quadriceps



**Figure 4.7 - An illustration depicting the normal alignment of the tissues comprising the joint (left), the effects of medial rotation of the tibia (middle), and medial luxation of the patella (right).**

muscles in these dogs are displaced medially and bony deformities also are present. Dogs with Grade III luxations may 'skip' like dogs with Grade II luxations, although more frequently. If the patella is luxated more often than it is in its normal position, the dog will develop a 'weightbearing lameness'. This means that the dog will bear some weight on the affected leg, but will walk with a limp.

**Grade IV:** Grade IV luxations are the most severe form of the condition, as the patella is always luxated and cannot be replaced manually. Dogs with Grade IV patellar luxations have significant deformities of the bones and other components that comprise the stifle joint. Affected dogs walk with their hind legs crouched in a permanently flexed position, and are unable to extend their hind legs due to the permanent luxation of the patella.

### Diagnosis

The diagnosis of a luxating patella alone is simple, as the patella can be felt or moved out of place during a physical examination. Radiographs will reveal joint deformities and help the veterinarian determine the grade of the luxation. Other orthopedic conditions that often coexist in dogs with luxation of the patella include hip dysplasia, cranial cruciate ligament rupture and Legg-Calvé-Perthes disease (see previous section on **Legg-Calvé-Perthes Disease**).

“Surgical treatment of patellar luxation has two goals: 1) to return the patella to its proper position, and 2) to realign the other components of the stifle joint to keep it in this position.”

### Treatment

The recommended treatment for a dog with patellar luxation depends on the grade of the luxation and the dog's age. Dogs that are not lame can simply be monitored for any changes that would indicate an increase in the severity of the luxation; surgery is not recommended for these animals. However, surgery is recommended for any dog that is lame and especially for those whose bones are still growing.

Surgical treatment of patellar luxation has two goals: 1) to return the patella to its proper position, and 2) to realign the other components of the stifle joint to keep it in this position. A veterinary surgeon may use a combination of techniques and procedures to achieve these goals. These include recentering the part of the tibia (shin) bone to which the patellar ligament attaches, cutting or reinforcing the ligaments on the sides of the joint, deepening the trochlear groove on the femur to increase the likelihood that the patella will remain within that groove, and shortening and realigning the tibia and or femur (see **Figure 4.8**).

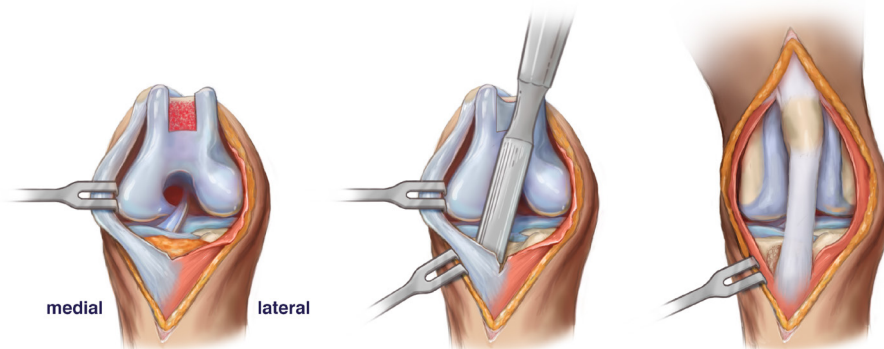
Dogs undergoing surgery should be walked only on a leash for up to six weeks after the procedure to give the joint sufficient time to recover. After that, the dog should be brought back up to his/her regular speed slowly, so as not to reinjure the area. Veterinarians may prescribe antiinflammatory drugs to help control pain following surgery.

Surgery is usually very successful in restoring normal activity in dogs with Grades III luxations. Because of their small size, Westies tend to have a higher success rate than large breed dogs. Dogs with Grade IV luxations may not return to normal activity, even after surgery. As many as 50% of all dogs undergoing surgery may have incidental Grade I luxations afterwards. Although arthritis cannot be avoided by surgery, it may not be as severe as if the patella had remained luxated.

### Degenerative Joint Disease – A Consequence of Patellar Luxation

Degenerative joint disease, also called osteoarthritis, results from the breakdown of the bones and cartilage that make up a joint. During the development of degenerative joint disease, the cartilage that normally serves a cushioning function between bones, loses this ability. This often initiates inflammation of the cells that line the joint (synovium) and the surrounding joint capsule. The inflammatory mediators released by these tissues adversely affect the cartilage and any ligaments within the joint, resulting in loss of cartilage cells, thickening of ligaments, joint pain, stiffness and reduced range of motion. As the pain makes it difficult to move, the muscles may lose some of their size and strength.

### Trochlear block resection and tibial tuberosity transposition



**Figure 4.8** - An illustration depicting trochlear block resection and transposition of the tibial tuberosity in a dog with medial patellar luxation.

## Current Research About Luxation of the Patella

Vodnarek J, Schneider E, Bockstahler B, Schnabl-Feichter E. Outcome of surgical correction of medial patellar luxation in dogs weighing less than 10 kg. *Vet Rec* 2024 Apr 20;194(8):e3994.

Various trochleoplasty techniques, including trochlear wedge recession and trochlear block recession, are used to treat dogs with medial patellar luxation. However, the objective outcomes of these surgical procedures are underreported. In this study, medical records were examined for dogs weighing less than 10 kg that underwent either procedure and tibial tuberosity transposition to address grade I-III medial patellar luxation. Long-term (at least 1 year after the last procedure) follow-up included orthopedic and radiographic examinations. Overall, surgical treatment resulted in a favorable outcome. While there might be a higher risk for reluxation after trochlear wedge recession, a larger-scale prospective study would be required to determine which treatment is superior.

Cortina BL, Terreros A, Daye RM. Outcomes and complications of a modified tibial tuberosity transposition technique in the treatment of medial patellar luxation in dogs. *Vet Surg* 2023 Jul;52(5):756-765.

This study was performed to report a modification of the tibial tuberosity transposition technique used to treat medial patellar luxation in 235 dogs, and report its complications. Short-term minor complications included low-grade reluxation (3.6%), incisional seroma (3%), pin-associated swelling (2.3%), and superficial incisional infection (1.3%). Short-term major complications included pin migration (1%), incisional infection (0.6%), tibial tuberosity fracture (0.6%), and high grade reluxation (0.6%). The owner survey indicated a 100% satisfaction rate.

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