

HIPS THAT HURT

A rising number of younger people here are seeking help for hip pain



Akshita Nanda
Correspondent

Cherie Koh, 34, had to change jobs twice because of persistent hip pain.

In 2024, the mother of three worked at an infant care centre, but found it too hard to sit cross-legged.

She switched to assembling furniture and repair work. However, the pain grew worse. "I couldn't squat, I couldn't walk for a long time, I couldn't climb a ladder," she recalls. "It was very painful."

She had keyhole surgery in 2025 to repair a tear in the labrum of her right hip, as well as shave off excess bone growth that caused the thigh bone to rub against the hip socket painfully.

She is now back to work, this time installing curtains and blinds, or removing them, for clients of a local laundry service.

Koh is among a rising number of people aged 20 to 50 who are seeking help for hip pain.

Doctors say these people are more likely to engage in high-impact activities that stress the joint. Increased activity can lead to injury or to discomfort from structural issues in the joint that might otherwise be asymptomatic.

They tell The Straits Times that hip pain used to be a less common complaint.

Wang Ming, an adjunct assistant professor from National University Hospital's department of orthopaedic surgery, says: "Five years ago, I might have seen one or two patients with hip pain in a typical week. Today, it is not uncommon for me to see four or five such patients weekly."

The consultant puts this increase across all age groups down to more people choosing to run or do high-intensity fitness activities, which increase the risk of hip injury.

People also want to stay physically active for longer, even as they age. They thus seek help for conditions that limit their activity.

Consultant T. Jegathesan, of Tan Tock Seng Hospital's (TTSH) department of orthopaedic surgery, has noticed more people aged 20 to 50 seeking medical attention for hip pain. In 2022, he saw fewer than 50 patients in this age group. In 2025, he evaluated 150 patients in this age group for hip pain.

Orthopaedic surgeon Lim Chin Tat from private practice The Or-

thopaedic Practice and Surgery says he has seen at least a 10 per cent increase in patients aged 20 to 45 complaining of hip pain.

The senior consultant attributes this to more participation in sports and exercise, including fitness races such as Hyrox.

"These events often require repetitive deep squat-type movements, such as wall balls, burpees and sandbag lunges. The increased hip flexion and loading involved in these activities can place stress on the hip joint and may lead to injuries," he says.

WHERE DOES IT HURT?

Wang says pain in the front of the hip or groin region is commonly associated with osteoarthritis; or with tears of a cartilage structure in the hip, known as the labrum; or with a structural abnormality called femoroacetabular impingement (FAI). People with FAI have an abnormally shaped thighbone or femur which comes in repeated contact with the edge of the hip socket.

Pain over the outer hip is associated with inflammation or irritation of the tendons and bursae, which are fluid-filled sacs that cushion the bones, tendons and muscles around the joints.

Pain in the buttock region is often not caused by the hip, but because of issues with the lumbar spine and surrounding muscles.

Lim says pain from hip degeneration through arthritis is more common in older people. Patients aged 20 to 45 are more likely to suffer from FAI, also known as hip impingement.

Doctors say it is not known why some people have extra bony prominences around the hip joint. It could be due to genetic factors, or because of high levels of sporting activity during adolescence.

It is not clear how many people in Singapore have FAI. The condition is better known in the US, where it is estimated that around 54 in 100,000 people have hip impingement.

LABRUM TEARS IN HIP CAN HURT

Two-thirds of the hip-related cases Jegathesan sees involve labral tears. The labrum is the cartilage that cushions the hip joint. It also acts as a seal, stabilising the ball-like top of the thighbone in the hip socket.



A 3D-printed hip model. Doctors say hip pain used to be a less common complaint. ST PHOTO: GAVIN FOO



Before surgery in 2025, Cherie Koh, 34, could not climb ladders because of hip pain. ST PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI

A torn labrum usually will not heal on its own and needs to be stitched up through surgery.

Jegathesan says the labrum can tear because of accidents, or repetitive loading of the hip joint through activities such as high-intensity interval training (HIIT), football, CrossFit, running and gym-based strength training.

Even lifting and carrying children or other loads in daily life can increase stress on the hip.

Hip impingement can also cause labral tears. Small tears in the labrum begin to enlarge because of repetitive stress. The resilience of the labral and cartilage tissue declines, and people begin to notice discomfort and pain.

In the case of his patient Koh, the pain affected her ability to make a living, as well as care for her three children aged nine to 12.

She opted for surgery and had to stay off her feet for three to four months to heal. During this time, she did paperwork, instead of more laborious work that paid better.

"I saved up and was prepared for a long period of recovery," she says. "Before the surgery, I felt very restricted. It was very painful. After the surgery, I can sit cross-legged again."

ABNORMAL BONE SHAPE CAN LEAD TO PAIN

Chia Jun Siong, 30, has been playing badminton since primary school.

A few years ago, he began experiencing pain after his weekly sessions that made it hard for him to sleep.

"It was like a knife poking the skin," he says, adding that the pain surfaced only when he lay down.

Chia, who works in his family's wholesale business, runs up to three times a week as well. Running caused him some discomfort, but not as much as playing the racket sport.

In 2024, he was sent to TTSH for whiplash after a car accident and decided to seek help for his hip as well.

Magnetic resonance imaging revealed excess bone growth around the head of the thighbone or femur that rubbed abnormally against the hip socket when he moved. He also had a tear in the labrum.

He had a keyhole procedure, hip arthroscopic surgery, to shave the excess bone and repair the labrum in 2025.

CONTINUED on C2