

Men's Health

ask Men's Health

A Crack in Your Armor

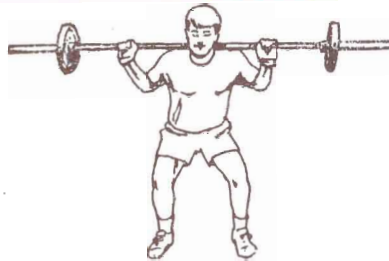
When I do squats and leg presses, my knees make a cracking sound. It doesn't hurt, but I'm worried that I may be doing some damage.

—A.R., BERKELEY, CALIF.

You might be. No one knows for certain why joints crack. Some experts theorize that the tendons in the joint roll over each other—or an adjacent bone—creating a snapping noise. Others speculate that your joints exist in a vacuum-like seal and pop every time they're twisted or pulled apart.

Whatever the reason, a cracking joint may be a joint under stress, and that's not a good sign. "Continuous wear and tear on any joint can inflame it and make it painful over time," says Richard T. Braver, D.P.M., a sports podiatrist in Englewood, New Jersey. "And in many cases, it indicates that you may be doing something wrong."

You can probably get back to training noise-free if you pay a little more attention to your form. When performing a squat, your



Finally, strengthen your hamstrings. Your quadriceps benefit the most from squats and leg presses, and they can become overdeveloped, causing a muscle imbalance that could screw up the alignment of the kneecap. So be sure to exercise the other side of your legs, the hamstrings, by incorporating at least three sets of leg curls into your routine.

legs ought to be shoulder-width apart, with your knees aligned directly above your feet. Don't drop your butt below your knee level at the bottom of the movement. "If you overextend the joint, it's likely to crack," says Dr. Braver. Apply the same rules of form when doing a leg press.

And don't forget to stretch. When neighboring muscles are too tight, they can strain the joint and pull it out of alignment. Warm up for at least five minutes by jogging lightly, then do some calf, hamstring and quadriceps stretches.

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