

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW About ACL Injuries

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You've probably read about football players tearing ligaments in their knees, but you may be surprised to learn that you're at risk too. Each year more than 200,000 adults experience an injury to their anterior cruciate ligament (ACL).

Your ACL is a major ligament that helps to stabilize your knee. It's vulnerable to stretching or tearing any time you change direction suddenly. That can happen during sports like basketball or gymnastics. It can also occur in a car crash or a simple fall.

ACL injuries can be serious and sometimes debilitating, but there are excellent treatment options. Elite athletes usually opt for surgery. The average office worker may prefer to try physical therapy first and wait to see if they need an operation.

Your knees absorb a lot of pressure over your lifetime, but **you can help protect them from risky movements and the effects of aging.**

Learn more about ACL injuries and how to prevent them.

Recovering From ACL Injuries

Both physical therapy and surgery can deliver positive results. One Scandinavian study compared patients who received physical therapy with and without surgery. Both groups enjoyed substantial improvement in their knee condition, including similar levels of comfort and functioning after 2 years.

These strategies can also help you heal:

1. **Ice the area.** Minor knee injuries may be treated at home. Apply ice and prop

your leg up on a pillow.

2. **See your doctor.** If you hear a popping noise, you may have ruptured your ACL. Your doctor will examine your knee and use an MRI scan to make their diagnosis.
3. **Consider surgery.** About half of ACL tears require reconstructive surgery to replace the injured ligament. **Long term success rates are estimated to be as high as 95%.**
4. **Try physical therapy.** Working with a physical therapist can have dramatic results. You'll learn to strengthen and stabilize your knees with movements like lunges and one-legged squats.
5. **Cycle and swim.** Cross training helps too. Enjoy activities that keep your knees aligned, such as cycling, swimming, and elliptical machines.
6. **Wear a brace.** Your knees may require extra support, at least temporarily. That could mean wearing a custom-made brace for sports that involve jumping and twisting.
7. **Take a long rest.** ACL tears often take 2 to 6 months to heal. Follow your doctor's recommendations to avoid reinjuries.

Preventing ACL Injuries

Many of the physical therapy exercises that treat ACL injuries can also prevent them.

Try these tips for healthy knees:

1. **Learn to jump.** Landing on your toes instead of your heels will exercise your calves rather than stressing your knees. Keeping your knees slightly bent reduces pressure too. In case of serious injuries, you may need to switch to low or no impact workouts.
2. **Train for strength. Building up the muscles in your thighs and hips will make life easier for your knees.** Consult a trainer or watch videos to ensure that you're using correct form.
3. **Stretch regularly.** Extending your range of motion makes injuries less likely. End each workout with a cool-down session that includes stretches for your lower body.
4. **Build up your bones.** Bone loss is a natural part of aging, and ACL injuries can increase the risk of premature osteoporosis. **You can offset some of these effects by caring for your bones with regular weight bearing exercise and a diet rich in calcium and vitamin D.**
5. **Practice yoga.** Recent research suggests that ACL injuries interrupt communications between your brain and body. Activities like yoga and dance will help you to stay coordinated and agile.

You can lower your risk for ACL injuries. Keeping your knees strong and flexible will help you to protect your mobility and continue enjoying the activities you love.