

KNEE

ACL Tear

The anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) is a strong band of tissue inside the knee that helps keep it stable, especially when you change direction quickly, stop suddenly, jump and land, or twist your knee. An ACL tear happens when this ligament is stretched too far or torn, often during sports or accidents. The tear can be partial (some fibers torn) or complete (fully torn).

How ACL tears happen

- Sports such as football, basketball, soccer, or skiing
- Sudden twisting or pivoting movements
- Landing awkwardly from a jump
- A direct blow to the knee, such as in contact sports
- Motor vehicle accidents or falls

Many people feel or hear a "pop" at the time of injury.

Common symptoms

- Sudden pain in the knee
- Swelling within a few hours
- A feeling that the knee is unstable or giving way
- Difficulty walking or putting weight on the leg
- Reduced ability to play sports

How it's diagnosed

Diagnosis includes a medical exam by a physician or physical therapist, along with an MRI to confirm the tear and check for other injuries, such as a meniscus tear.

Do all ACL tears need surgery?

Not always — it depends on your age, activity level, whether your knee feels unstable, and whether there are other injuries in the knee.

Non-surgical treatment may be suitable if you are less active, the knee feels stable, and you are willing to commit to physical therapy. It includes physical therapy, strengthening exercises, activity modification, and sometimes a knee brace.

Surgical treatment (ACL reconstruction) is often recommended if the knee keeps giving way, you want to return to pivoting or contact sports, or there are other knee injuries. The torn ligament is replaced with a graft, using tissue from your own body or a donor.

Recovery

After surgery, most patients use crutches for a short time, with swelling and stiffness at first; physical therapy starts early and is essential, usually lasting nine to twelve months.

- Walking normally: 4–6 weeks
- Running: 3–4 months
- Sports: 9–12 months

Risks

Infection, knee stiffness, ongoing pain, re-tear of the ACL, and rare blood clots. Most people recover well with proper rehabilitation.

Will my knee be normal again?

Many people return to sport and daily activities, regain strength and confidence, and have a stable knee. Some notice occasional stiffness or an increased risk of arthritis later in life.

Key takeaway

An ACL tear is a common knee injury that can affect stability. With the right treatment and good rehabilitation, most people return to an active lifestyle.