

Knee Ligament Injury:

Getting Back Into the Game After Surgery

Injuries to the Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) is very common among people who are involved in sports that have start-stop movements, pivoting and sudden changes in directions. These include sports like soccer, netball, tennis, dancing and skiing.

Dr Michael Soon, an orthopaedic surgeon practising at both Mount Elizabeth Hospital and Parkway East Hospital, navigates the twists and turns of this orthopaedic condition.



The ACL is one of the four major ligaments in the knee. Miss Xavier was visibly upset after finding out that hers was torn. She was an active young lady who had injured her knee during a session of beach volleyball. She had noted instability and swelling of her knee joint with other sporting activities.

A magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan confirmed Dr Michael Soon's diagnosis and also showed an associated meniscal (shock absorber) tear in the knee joint. This meant that surgery to reconstruct the ACL was warranted.

According to Dr Soon, ACL reconstruction surgery is generally successful, with more than 95 per cent of patients noting an improvement. If you count the type of knee surgeries performed, ACL reconstruction will be among the most frequent surgeries that is being done.

"However, not many patients are able to return to the pre-injury level of sports participation, with approximately two out of three are able to do so. During my sabbatical in Barcelona, I had the opportunity to treat La Liga soccer players. One notable example of a patient who managed to return to pre-injury level would be a player from FC Barcelona and Spain," say Dr Soon.

ACL is an important core ligament in the knee joint, responsible for providing stability during pivoting and jumping. As this ligament is within the knee joint and surrounded by joint fluid, a tear of the ACL does not heal by itself, but remains torn. Hence surgery to reconstruct this ligament is required if any patient wants to return to sports or to prevent further instability from occurring.

In addition, if an ACL remains torn and the knee is unstable, it can lead to further injuries to the knee, like a meniscal injury or other ligamentous tears. For a "standard" surgery, the ACL reconstruction has undergone much change in the last decade. The technique continues to evolve as surgeons worldwide have noted that not all patients are able to return to sports after ACL surgery, and are thus constantly striving to improve the success statistics. Along with improving techniques, the implants to fix the reconstructed ligaments have also improved. Together with better physiotherapy protocols, hopefully more patients will be able to return to sports.

"I want to return to beach volleyball," said Ms Xavier. And so Dr Soon proceeded to explain what was needed to reconstruct her ACL and the rationale for doing so.

Surgery for Miss Xavier was uneventful and progressed smoothly. When Dr Soon followed up with her the second week after her surgery, she was walking well, with minimal pain and good range of motion. By the sixth week, Miss Xavier's reconstructed ACL was "rock-solid" – a laudatory term to say that all was well, and Dr Soon advised her to continue physiotherapy and to return for a review subsequently.

Another patient that Dr Soon had operated on previously called for a review. Mr Ahmad had torn not only his ACL, but another two major ligaments in his knee – multiple ligament ruptures. As he was a Muslim, Mr Ahmad did not want to use donor ligaments for his surgery, and as such, Dr Soon had to reconstruct all his ligaments during the same operation using Mr Ahmad's own knee tendons, one of the most complicated surgeries to perform.

As it turned out, Mr Ahmad achieved full range of motion after his knee surgery. He has since returned to sports and is running 8km three times a week.

"As an orthopaedic surgeon, I do not only wish for my patients to just get better, but return to their pre-injury level of sports. When I saw Miss Xavier six months after her surgery, I asked if she had returned to beach volley ball. She said she had not, but started salsa dance classes instead! Needless to say, I was very satisfied with her full recovery," shares Dr Soon.

For more information or an appointment, please call our 24-Hour Helpline at 6735 5000.

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