

What does an 'ACL Rupture' mean for your pet?

What is an 'ACL'?

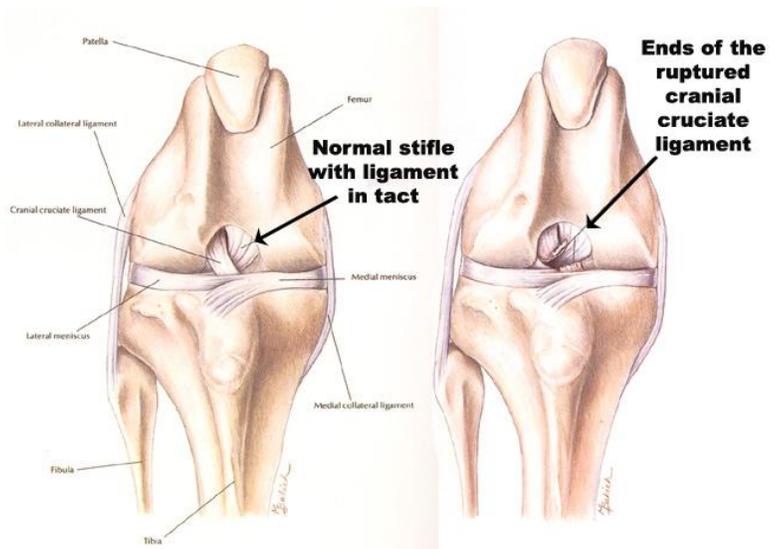
The Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL) is one of eleven different ligaments that hold the stifle joint (knee) together while still allowing a stable range of movement. More specifically; it crosses over within the joint space, anchoring at the front and back, giving the stifle joint 'backwards-forwards' stability.

Why do ACLs break?

As many footballers would tell you; the knee joint does not cope well with rotation. With the foot planted firmly on the ground and the upper body twisting to change direction, the knee joint is subjected to rotational forces that it cannot always cope with. In dogs, the classic cause is chasing a stick or ball that suddenly bounces off in a different direction. The sudden shift in momentum can be enough to strain the ACL to breaking point and is even more likely in older, arthritic or over-weight dogs. However, any dog, doing any level of exercise is capable of rupturing an ACL.

How do I know if my pet has ruptured an ACL?

The lack of joint stability that results is VERY painful. Most dogs become hopping lame on the affected leg straight away, but occasionally lameness can set in over a period of days. An ACL rupture should be suspected in any dog that goes suddenly lame on one hind leg during exercise and a visit to the clinic should be organized straight away. On examination, most of these dogs have a distinctive instability of the joint which is diagnostic of this type of injury. In addition to a complete physical exam, your veterinarian will probably take X-rays of your dog's knee to investigate the extent of damage and rule out other possible causes of lameness. X-rays will allow your veterinarian to determine the presence of fluid or arthritis in the joint, and also whether any small pieces of bone broke off with the ligament when it ruptured. If left untreated, these dogs would suffer considerable pain in the short-term and then debilitating arthritis in the long-term.



Dogs At Risk for Torn ACLs

Certain breeds are more prone, including Labrador retrievers, Newfoundlands, German shepherds, Rottweilers, and Golden Retrievers.

Obese animals and those that get occasional strenuous exercise may also be more likely to develop ACL injuries. Often, these chronic conditions persist for long periods of time, with the dog gradually becoming more lame as the

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ligament becomes more and more damaged. Sometimes, however, a dog will have no obvious symptoms until the ligament finally ruptures, often with something as simple as a slight misstep.

Studies have shown that about half of the dogs that rupture the ACL on one leg will develop the condition in the opposite leg.

What can you do about it?

Because the pain of an ACL rupture is due to the joint's instability, effective management centers on correcting that instability. Most dogs will require a surgical procedure that involves entering the joint space to 'tidy-up' the frayed ends of the ruptured ligament and fixing an artificial ligament around the joint. This allows us to assess the joint for damage, to help reduce the risk of osteoarthritis and to give back some 'backwards-forwards' stability to the joint.

What does the future hold for my pet?

With surgery, medication and a period of strict rest following the operation, we can expect to achieve 95% return of function to the affected leg within 3 months. Once surgery is performed, it is normally permanent and does not have to be repeated. Occasionally, however, the opposite knee may suffer the same injury at some point in the future and then also need to be corrected.

Without attention, the knee remains unstable and very painful for some time. Eventually the joint capsule will tighten as it scars; leaving the joint with about 50% return of function, more arthritis in the long-term and considerably more pain in the short-term.

If you have any further questions about your pet's injury, please don't hesitate to ask.

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