

ACL tear: the pop, the swelling and the nine to 12 months back, as Singaporeâ??s hospitals explain

Description

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The anterior cruciate ligament, or ACL, is the knee ligament most often injured, according to SingHealth, and the National University Hospital (NUH) says it is especially common in basketball and football. SingHealth lists the warning signs: immediate pain, a popping sound as the ligament ruptures, and swelling within four to 12 hours. Here is how to spot an ACL tear, and what getting back to sport really involves.

How the ACL gets hurt

The knee has four ligaments, tough bands of tissue that keep the joint stable. The ACL sits in the centre of the knee and steadies it for cutting, twisting, jumping and pivoting, NUH says.

Most ACL injuries come from a rapid or awkward twist: the knee stops or changes direction suddenly, or twists on landing. A direct hit, such as a football tackle, can do it too. NHG Health, the public healthcare group that runs Tan Tock Seng Hospital, describes the classic version as the knee twisting while the foot stays planted, in contact sports such as football and rugby, or after a fall.

The signs to take seriously

SingHealthâ??s six symptoms to watch for:

- Pain straight after the injury
- Swelling of the knee within four to 12 hours
- A popping sound when the ligament ruptures
- Difficulty moving the knee
- Walking with a painful limp
- A feeling that the knee is unstable or gives way during sport or daily activities

NUH adds that you may feel the knee shift out of place. NHG Health adds that you will not be able to carry on. That is the useful test on the pitch: if the knee popped, swelled fast and will not hold you, stop playing. SingHealthâ??s advice is to stop straight away and start rest, ice, compression and elevation, and to see a doctor promptly if severe knee pain leaves you unable to put weight on the leg, or the lower leg turns numb or weak.

Getting it checked

Doctors usually diagnose an ACL injury from what happened and a physical examination, SingHealth says. An X-ray rules out a fracture, and an MRI may be ordered to look for damage to the meniscus or cartilage. NHG Health notes that ACL injuries can come with those other injuries, along with damage to the surrounding ligaments.

For the painful, swollen knee in the first days, NHG Health advises rest, ice, compression and elevation, with anti-inflammatory medication to control symptoms. NUH suggests keeping weight off the knee and using crutches if needed, and some patients are given a splint or brace.

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Surgery or physiotherapy

A complete ACL tear does not heal, according to NHG Health. For people who are fairly inactive, play less intensive sport and have no ongoing instability, the group says physiotherapy and a protective knee brace can be enough. It also warns that this route carries a higher risk of injuring the knee again and of earlier osteoarthritis.

For active people whose knee keeps giving way, NHG Health recommends reconstruction. It is keyhole surgery and one of the most common knee operations. The new ligament is usually made from the patientâ??s own inner hamstring tendons, with the patellar tendon a less common option. Physiotherapy before the operation matters too, so the knee goes in with as much movement and strength as possible.

The long road back

Expect crutches and a knee brace for around six weeks after surgery, then a structured programme to rebuild movement and strength, with functional exercises to prepare for sport. NHG Health puts the whole rehabilitation at nine to 12 months.

When you do return, SingHealthâ??s HealthXchange notes that a functional brace may suit people who have had an ACL tear or reconstruction and want extra protection for the knee. It also says there is limited evidence that wearing a brace prevents injury in the first place.

Nine months to a year is a long time out, which is the best argument for taking that first pop seriously. Get the knee assessed early, follow the rehabilitation through, and the court or pitch will still be there.

This article is general information, not medical advice. If you have hurt your knee, see a doctor.

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