



Akron Children's Sports Rehab Implements Evidence-Based ACL Program

By Jessica Ciborek, Physical Therapist

It's 5 p.m. on a Monday, and you breathe a sigh of relief that you made it to your son's soccer game on time. In the blink of an eye, he's down and holding his knee as he cries out in pain. You hear gasps from other parents and the typical "Thinking of you – fingers crossed it's not his ACL!"

It is his ACL, and your son has surgery to repair the tear. Now you are at the first physical therapy visit, and you're scared. You've heard stories about kids rehabbing like crazy and reinjuring themselves – or never making it back to sports after an ACL tear. All you want is confirmation that your son will heal, and he's in capable hands with the physical therapist.

Two of our Sports Rehab physical therapists have gone above and beyond in implementing a top-notch evidence-based program focused on the latest research pertaining to ACL rehabilitation. They compiled data and drew conclusions concerning the most up-to-date testing/treatment strategies involved in treating our ACL patients. "This involves a more standardized collaborative team approach – including the orthopedic surgeon, physical therapist, sports psychologist and athletic trainer – that will help patients achieve their goals," said Physical Therapist Daniel Stein, PT, DPT, ATC, CSCS. "Following best-practice guidelines will give patients the best chance to get back to their prior level of performance and reduce the risk of further injury."

Below is a Q&A with David Gabriel, PT, DPT, who collaborated with Daniel Stein, PT, DPT, ATC, CSCS, to create this program:

Q: How do you feel this new evidence-based program will best impact our patients in Sports Rehab?

A: This program allows our patients to feel more included in their care and the decision-making process. This criteria-based progression will allow the athlete, surgeon, physical therapist, athletic trainer and sports psychologist to all be on the same page through every phase of the recovery process. As patients meet the certain criteria for each phase, they will be permitted to progress in their recovery process and be cleared for more advanced exercise and activity.

This program was a collaborative effort to bring the most recent research, rehab techniques and testing strategies to the forefront of our care. We do not want to treat every athlete the same, as everyone's recovery process is unique. However, it is important that both the therapist and patient are held to a high standard so we can achieve the best results.



Q: What is the current evidence-based recommendation as far as time goes for return to sport after an ACL reconstruction?

A: The timeline for return to play is the first question patients always ask. The most recent research recommends waiting 9-12 months for full return to sport. The length of time for recovery is a key factor, but we also base the decision on functional outcome measures, functional testing, strength testing utilizing an isokinetic machine and dynamometers.

Q: What was the most interesting evidence you found surrounding ACL injuries that may differ from the way we have treated them in the past?

A: I think the concept of continuous and more specific testing throughout the different phases of rehab is something to be highlighted. Testing for ACL is usually conducted toward the very end of the recovery process as opposed to periodically throughout. We have found that strength testing should also be emphasized, as weakness in the quadriceps and hamstrings are predictors of reinjures. We are conducting more frequent and objective strength tests. We have added a sports psychologist, so she helps patients address the psychological stress and fear that comes with injury.

Q: What is your advice for athletes who are undergoing ACL reconstruction?

A: An ACL injury is devastating to an athlete at any age and, unfortunately, not all injuries are preventable. When athletes learn they will need surgery, sit out for the rest of the season and undergo months of rehabilitation, it can be very difficult to keep a positive attitude. It's important to use the entire care team for support: your school's athletic trainers, the sports medicine doctors and orthopedic surgeon, physical therapist and sports psychologist.

Your ACL recovery will be a journey. Your goal of returning to the field or court will take time, so celebrate the smaller victories. Walking without crutches, achieving full knee joint motion, and gaining strength in your legs are all achievements to be celebrated. This recovery will be an excellent process to challenge you both physically and mentally. Embrace the challenge, and you will succeed!