

Is Surgery the Answer for ACL Injuries?

Discuss with your veterinarian the facts about dog ACL injuries before making a treatment decision.

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Injury to the ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) is the most common canine orthopedic knee problem. Larger dog breeds are more commonly affected. Partial or complete tearing of the ACL can be caused by trauma to the knee, weakening of the ligament as a result of excessive cortisol levels in the body (from chronic administration of steroids, such as prednisone or from Cushing's disease) or immune damage to the ligament. Clinical signs include acute lameness, decreased use of the affected leg or lack of weight-bearing ability on the affected leg. Treatment may involve rest, natural remedies or surgery. Consider the following points before proceeding with surgery:

1. Dogs with partial tears of the ACL may improve without surgery. Four to eight weeks of rest, with only restricted activity, may allow the torn ACL fibers to heal.
2. Smaller dogs are less likely to require surgery than larger dogs because smaller dogs are less likely to suffer a complete rupture of the ligament, and because their smaller dogs are generally able to handle joint injuries better.
3. In most cases, surgery does not have to be performed on an emergency basis. A second opinion may be helpful in order to determine if surgery is really necessary.
4. Several surgical techniques can correct a torn ACL. No one technique is perfect, and every surgeon has a favorite technique. If surgery is needed, it's important to obtain several opinions in order to determine which technique is most appropriate for your dog.
5. Natural therapies may allow many dogs to recover without surgery. I have had success using the following natural therapies:
Homeopathic remedies, including arnica and aconitum (well known for their abilities to aid in healing any sort of injury) and hypericum (a homeopathic version of St. John's wort, known for reducing nerve injuries).
Herbs, including white peony, licorice and rhubarb, which reduce inflammation invigorate blood, decrease bleeding and bruising, and assist in healing from any sort of traumatic injury.
Nutritional supplements, such as bromelain (an enzyme found in pineapple that reduces inflammation), and glucosamine and chondroitin, well known joint supplements that reduce pain and inflammation, and provide the building blocks needed to aid in the repair of damaged soft tissues.

Want to read more about natural and holistic healthcare? Check out the Natural Health Solutions column by Shawn Messonnier, DVM, in every issue of Dog World magazine.