Follow-Up Shows Over Half Of ACL Reconstructions Could Be Avoided

In the summer of 2010, researchers from Lund University in Sweden reported that 60 percent of all anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstructions could be avoided in favor of rehabilitation. The results made waves around the world, and were met with concerns that the results would not hold up in the long term. Now the researchers have published a follow-up study that confirms the results from 2010 and also show that the risk of osteoarthritis and meniscal surgery is no higher for those treated with physiotherapy alone.

“We have continued with our study and for the first time are able to present a five-year follow-up on the need for and results of ACL surgery as compared with physiotherapy. The findings have been published in the *British Medical Journal* and are basically unchanged from 2010. This will no doubt surprise many people, as we have not seen any difference in the incidence of osteoarthritis”, says Richard Frobell, one of the researchers behind the study and an associate professor at Lund University, as well as a clinician at the orthopedic department, Helsingborg Hospital.

Richard Frobell explains that the research group’s results from 2010, which were published in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, caused a stir and questions were raised as to whether it was possible to say that an operation would not be needed in the long term. Half of the patients who were randomly assigned not to undergo reconstructive surgery have had an operation in the five years since, after experiencing symptoms of instability.

“In this study, there was no increased risk of osteoarthritis or meniscal surgery if the ACL injury was treated with physiotherapy alone compared with if it was treated with surgery. Neither was there any difference in patients’ experiences of function, activity level, quality of life, pain, symptoms or general health”, says Richard Frobell.

“The new report shows that there was no difference in any outcome between those who were operated on straight away, those who were operated on later and those who did not have an operation at all. The message to the medical experts who are treating young, active patients with ACL injuries is that it may be better to start by considering rehabilitation rather than operating straight away.” In Sweden, over 5 000 people every year suffer an anterior cruciate ligament injury – mainly young people involved in sports. There are different schools of treatment and Sweden stands out with treatment that is in line with the results of the study.

“On an international front, almost all of those with ACL injuries are operated on. In Sweden, just over half are operated on, but in southern Sweden we have been working for many years to use advanced rehabilitation training as the first method of treatment. Our research so far has confirmed that we are right in not choosing to

operate on these injuries immediately. Longer-term follow-up is important, however, if we are to look more closely at the development of osteoarthritis in particular", says Richard Frobell.

The research group, whose study is called KANON, Knee ACL NON-operative versus operative treatment, is now moving on to the next stage. This year, the third part of the study will begin, following up the patients ten years after anterior cruciate ligament injury. Richard Frobell has also entered into a collaboration with researchers at the School of Economics and Management at Lund University to evaluate the health economics aspects of different treatment methods for ACL injury.

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