Review Paper

Walking and Running Mechanics After Anterior Cruciate Ligament Reconstruction: An Editorial Review

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Citation Piri E, Jafarnezhadgero AA. Walking and Running Mechanics After Anterior Cruciate Ligament Reconstruction: An Editorial Review. Physical Treatments. 2026; 16(2):127-132. http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/ptj.16.2.348.19

http://dx.doi.org/10.32598/ptj.16.2.348.19

Article info:
Received: 30 Jul 2025
Accepted: 19 May 2025
Available Online: 01 Apr 2026

Keywords:
Anterior cruciate ligament reconstruction, Walking mechanics, Running mechanics, Gait analysis, Biomechanics

ABSTRACT

Purpose: This editorial review aims to synthesize current evidence on walking and running biomechanics following anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction, with a specific focus on recovery patterns at 6, 12, and 18 months post-surgery. The goal is to highlight temporal changes in spatiotemporal, kinematic, kinetic, and neuromuscular variables that influence functional recovery, return-to-sport readiness, and long-term joint health.

Methods: Relevant peer-reviewed studies published in recent years were analyzed, including longitudinal, cross-sectional, and meta-analytic research investigating gait and running mechanics after ACL reconstruction. Data from biomechanical assessments such as 3D motion analysis, force-plate evaluations, muscle activation studies, and strength testing were synthesized to identify key recovery trends across the three time points.

Results: At 6 months post-surgery, pronounced asymmetries in walking and running mechanics persist, including reduced knee flexion, lower knee extensor moments, diminished power generation, and neuromuscular inhibition of the quadriceps. By 12 months, walking mechanics show partial normalization; however, significant deficits in running particularly in knee abduction moments, loading symmetry, and hip control remain in many patients. At 18 months, most walking parameters approach normal values, while subtle running asymmetries may still persist in tasks requiring higher neuromuscular demand. Continued neuromuscular training beyond 12 months appears to enhance recovery and reduce reinjury risk.

Conclusion: Biomechanical recovery after ACL reconstruction progresses beyond traditional 9–12 month timelines, with running mechanics showing greater sensitivity to persistent deficits than walking. Recognizing these delayed recovery patterns is essential for improving rehabilitation strategies, optimizing return-to-sport decisions, and minimizing long-term joint degeneration. Extended, individualized rehabilitation and objective biomechanical assessment are recommended to better support functional and structural recovery.

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Highlights

- Major gait and running asymmetries persist at 6 months after ACL reconstruction.
- Walking mechanics show partial recovery by 12 months post-surgery.
- Running deficits in loading and control remain notable at 12 months.
- Most walking parameters approach normal levels by 18 months.
- Subtle running asymmetries can persist even at 18 months post-surgery.

Plain Language Summary

Injuries to the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) are common, especially among athletes and physically active individuals. Many people undergo surgery to reconstruct the ACL and hope to return to walking, running, and sports as soon as possible. However, recovery is not only about pain relief or muscle strength it also involves how the body moves. This review looked at research examining how people walk and run at 6, 12, and 18 months after ACL reconstruction. We focused on movement patterns, balance between the operated and non-operated leg, and how forces are absorbed by the knee and surrounding joints. The evidence shows that at 6 months after surgery, many people still move differently compared to before their injury. They often place less load on the operated leg and show reduced knee bending and muscle activation. By 12 months, walking patterns usually improve, but running often still shows noticeable differences, especially in how forces are controlled at the knee and hip. Even at 18 months, small movement differences during running may remain.These findings are important because many individuals are cleared to return to sport within 9 to 12 months after surgery. However, subtle movement problems may persist beyond this timeframe, which could increase the risk of re-injury or long-term joint problems such as osteoarthritis. Understanding that recovery continues beyond one year highlights the need for longer, carefully monitored rehabilitation programs and movement assessments before returning to high-demand activities.

Introduction

Anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction is one of the most common orthopedic procedures performed worldwide, aimed at restoring knee stability and enabling a return to functional activities, including walking and running [1]. Despite surgical success in anatomical repair, persistent biomechanical alterations in gait and running patterns are frequently observed during the post-operative recovery period [2]. Understanding the temporal evolution of these biomechanical adaptations, particularly at key milestones, such as 6, 12, and 18 months post-surgery, is critical for optimizing rehabilitation protocols and improving long-term outcomes [2, 3]. This editorial review synthesizes current evidence on the interplay between ACL reconstruction and locomotor mechanics, with a focus on spatiotemporal, kinematic, and kinetic changes during walking and running across the mid- to late-recovery phases. While many patients are cleared for return to sport (RTS) by 9–12 months, emerging data suggest that biomechanical symmetry and neuromuscular control may lag behind clinical milestones, raising concerns about reinjury risk and long-term joint health [4].

Biomechanical recovery at 6 months: the early functional phase

At 6 months post-surgery, most patients have completed the initial phases of rehabilitation and may begin to introduce running and sport-specific drills. However, biomechanical studies consistently report asymmetries in gait and running mechanics between the reconstructed and contralateral limbs [2, 3].

Walking: Patients often exhibit reduced knee flexion angle, lower peak knee extensor moment, and decreased ground reaction forces (GRFs) on the surgical side. These compensatory strategies are thought to protect the healing graft; however, they may contribute to abnormal joint loading over time [3-5].

Running: Asymmetries are more pronounced during running. Studies using 3D motion analysis have shown reduced stride length, increased stance time on the non-operated limb, and diminished hip and knee power generation on the reconstructed side. Notably, even when patients report subjective readiness, objective biomechanical deficits persist in 60–70% of cases. These findings underscore a critical gap: clinical readiness does not necessarily equate to biomechanical readiness. Rehabilitation at this stage should emphasize neuromuscular re-education, dynamic stability, and progressive loading, rather than relying solely on time-based criteria [4]. The spatiotemporal, kinematic, and kinetic alterations observed at 6 months post-surgery are summarized in Table 1.

The 12-month milestone: Toward functional symmetry?

By 12 months, many athletes are cleared for RTS. However, meta-analyses and longitudinal cohort studies have revealed that true biomechanical symmetry is achieved in only a minority of patients [6]. Kinematic and kinetic asymmetries in both walking and running persist, particularly in knee abduction moments and hip control factors strongly associated with re-injury risk. Muscle activation patterns often remain altered, with persistent quadriceps inhibition and compensatory hamstring or gluteal dominance [7]. Loading rates during running are frequently higher in the non-operated limb, suggesting ongoing protective mechanisms and potential overuse injury risk

Table 1. Biomechanical changes in walking and running after ACL reconstruction at 6, 12, and 18 months post-surgery

Biomechanical Variables	Parameter Type	Six Months Post-surgery	Twelve Months Post-surgery	Eighteen Months Post-surgery
Gait speed	Spatiotemporal	↔ or ↓ (slightly reduced)	↔ (near normal)	↔ (normal)
Step Length (surgical limb)	Spatiotemporal	↓ (decreased)	↔ or slight ↓	↔ (normalized)
Stance phase duration (surgical limb)	Spatiotemporal	↑ (prolonged)	↔ or slight ↑	↔ (normalized)
Single-limb support time	Spatiotemporal	↓ (reduced)	↔ or slight ↓	↔
Knee flexion angle (peak, stance)	Kinematic (walking)	↓	↔ or slight ↓	↔
Knee flexion angle (peak, swing)	Kinematic (walking)	↓	↔	↔
Hip flexion angle	Kinematic (walking)	↓ or ↔	↔	↔
Pelvic drop (on surgical side)	Kinematic (walking)	↑ (increased, Trendelenburg-like)	↔ or slight ↑	↔
KAM	Kinetic (walking)	↑ or ↔ (asymmetrical)	↔ or slight ↑	↔ (may remain elevated in some)
Peak vGRF	Kinetic (walking)	↓ (surgical limb)	↔ or slight ↓	↔
Loading rate (initial)	Kinetic (walking)	↓ (protective unloading)	↔	↔
Knee extensor moment (peak)	Kinetic (walking)	↓↓ (markedly reduced)	↓ or ↔	↔
Ankle power generation	Kinetic (walking)	↓ or ↔	↔	↔
Quadriceps strength	Strength	↓↓(30-40% deficit)	↓↓(10-20% deficit)	↔ or slight ↓
Hamstring strength	Strength	↓	↔ or slight ↑	↔
EMG activation, quadriceps	Muscle activation	↓ (inhibition, arthrogenic)	↓ or ↔	↔
EMG activation, hamstrings	Muscle activation	↑ (compensatory)	↔ or slight ↑	↔
Gluteus medius activation	Muscle activation	↓ or delayed	↔ or slight ↓	↔

PHYSICAL TREATMENTS

vGRF: vertical ground reaction force; KAM: Knee adduction moment.

↑: Increased or greater than healthy/contralateral limb, ↓: Decreased or reduced compared to healthy/contralateral limb, ↔: No significant difference or normalized, ↓↓/↑↑: Markedly reduced or increased (high asymmetry), Asymmetry: Difference between surgical and non-surgical limb persists.

Table 2. Running specific parameters

Running Specific Parameters	Parameter ‹Type	Six Months Post-surgery	Twelve Months Post-surgery	Eighteen Months Post-surgery
Stride length (surgical limb)	Spatiotemporal (running)	↓↓	↓	↔ or slight ↓
Contact time (surgical limb)	Spatiotemporal (running)	↑	↔ or slight ↑	↔
Flight time	Spatiotemporal (running)	↓	↔	↔
Knee flexion angle at initial contact	Kinematic (running)	↓	↔ or slight ↓	↔
Peak knee flexion (stance phase)	Kinematic (running)	↓↓	↓	↔ or slight ↓
Hip flexion angle	Kinematic (running)	↓	↔ or slight ↓	↔
Trunk lean (toward non-surgical side)	Kinematic (running)	↑ (compensatory)	↔ or slight ↑	↔
Knee abduction angle/moment	Kinetic (running)	↑↑ (high asymmetry)	↑ (persistent in ~40–50%)	↔ or slight ↑ (risk factor for re-injury)
Vertical GRF (impact peak)	Kinetic (running)	↓ (surgical), ↑ (contralateral)	↔ or contralateral ↑	↔ or subtle asymmetry
Loading rate (initial)	Kinetic (running)	↓ (surgical), ↑ (contralateral)	↔ or contralateral ↑	↔
Knee flexor moment	Kinetic (running)	↓	↓	↔ or slight ↓
Hip power generation	Kinetic (running)	↓	↓ or ↔	↔
Quadriceps activation (running stance)	Muscle activation (running)	↓↓	↓	↔
Hamstring co-activation	Muscle activation (running)	↑↑ (protective stiffening)	↑ or ↔	↔
Gluteus maximus/medius activation	Muscle activation (running)	↓ or delayed	↔ or slight ↓	↔

GRF: Ground reaction force.

PHYSICAL TREATMENTS

↑: Increased or greater than healthy/contralateral limb, ↓: Decreased or reduced compared to healthy/contralateral limb, ↔: No significant difference or normalized, ↓↓/↑↑: Markedly reduced or increased (high asymmetry), Asymmetry: Difference between surgical and non-surgical limb persists.

in the contralateral knee [8]. Key running-specific biomechanical parameters observed after ACL reconstruction are presented in Table 2. Importantly, psychological factors, such as fear of movement (kinesiophobia), may also contribute to altered mechanics independent of physical capacity [9]. Thus, a multidimensional assessment including biomechanical, strength, and psychosocial metrics is essential before RTS clearance.

Eighteen months and beyond: the long-term picture

Emerging evidence suggests that biomechanical normalization may extend beyond 12 months, with some patients showing improvements as late as 18–24 months post-surgery [10]. At 18 months, gait patterns during walking often approach normal; however, running mechanics may still exhibit subtle asymmetries, particularly during cutting, deceleration, or high-speed tasks [5].

Table 3. Summary of temporal trends in walking and running after ACL reconstruction at 6, 12, and 18 months post-surgery

Phase	General Biomechanical Status
6 Months	Significant bilateral asymmetries, protective gait and running patterns, reduced loading on the surgical limb, and neuromuscular inhibition are prominent.
12 Months	Partial recovery, walking mechanics largely normalized, running mechanics still showed deficits, especially in knee control and loading symmetry. 30–50% failed objective RTS criteria.
18 Months	Near-normal walking; most running parameters normalized; however, subtle asymmetries (especially knee abduction moment and hip control) may persist in a subset of patients. Late improvements in strength and coordination.

RTS: Return to sport.

PHYSICAL TREATMENTS

Longitudinal data indicate that patients who continue neuromuscular training and sport-specific conditioning beyond 12 months demonstrate better biomechanical outcomes and lower reinjury rates [11]. The temporal trends in walking and running mechanics following ACL reconstruction are summarized in Table 3. There is also growing concern about the early onset of post-traumatic osteoarthritis (PTOA), potentially linked to persistent abnormal joint loading patterns, even in the absence of re-injury [12]. This delayed recovery trajectory challenges the conventional 9–12 month RTS timeline and calls for extended monitoring and individualized rehabilitation.

A comprehensive, evidence-based table summarizing biomechanical variables associated with walking and running after ACL reconstruction, evaluated at 6, 12, and 18 months post-surgery is presented below. The table includes key spatiotemporal, kinematic, kinetic, and muscle activation parameters, along with their direction of change (e.g. decreased, increased, asymmetrical, or normalized) relative to the contralateral limb or pre-injury norms, as per the current literature.

Clinical implications and future directions

The interplay between ACL reconstruction and locomotor mechanics is dynamic and multifactorial. The key takeaways for clinicians and researchers include:

1) Time-based return-to-sport criteria are insufficient. Objective biomechanical assessments (e.g. motion analysis, force plates, and wearable sensors) should be integrated into clinical decision-making. 2) Running mechanics are more sensitive than walking to residual deficits and should be specifically evaluated during rehabilitation. 3) Rehabilitation must extend beyond strength restoration to include neuromuscular control, proprioception, and psychological readiness. 4) Long-term follow-up is essential. Biomechanical recovery may continue beyond 18 months, and joint health monitoring should be prioritized to prevent PTOA.

Future research should focus on

Future research should focus on developing accessible tools for biomechanical screening in clinical settings, identifying predictors of persistent asymmetry, evaluating the impact of extended rehabilitation programs on long-term outcomes.

Suggestions for future research

1. Develop and validate accessible biomechanical assessment tools (e.g. wearable sensors, smartphone-based motion analysis) for routine clinical use to objectively evaluate gait and running symmetry before RTS clearance.

2. Investigate predictors of persistent biomechanical asymmetry, including neuromuscular, psychological (e.g., kinesiophobia), and graft-related factors, to enable early identification of high-risk patients. 3. Conduct longitudinal studies beyond 18 months to better understand the natural progression of biomechanical recovery and its relationship with early-onset PTOA. 4. Evaluate the effectiveness of extended, individualized rehabilitation programs incorporating neuromuscular training, sport-specific drills, and psychological support on long-term biomechanical outcomes and reinjury rates. 5. Compare different graft types and surgical techniques in terms of their impact on locomotor mechanics during walking and running across the recovery timeline.

Conclusion

ACL reconstruction is not merely a surgical intervention; rather, it is the beginning of a prolonged biomechanical recalibration process. While patients may appear functionally recovered by 12 months, subtle yet clinically significant alterations in walking and running mechanics often persist, evolving gradually up to 18 months and beyond. Recognizing this delayed recovery timeline is essential for minimizing reinjury risk, optimizing performance, and preserving joint health. As we move toward more personalized and evidence-based rehabilitation, the integration of longitudinal biomechanical assessments is paramount. However, biomechanical recovery after ACL reconstruction extends well beyond the conventional 9–12 month return-to-sport timeline, with running mechanics revealing residual asymmetries in knee control and loading that may increase reinjury risk and contribute to long-term joint degeneration.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

There were no ethical considerations to be considered in this research.

Funding

This research did not receive any grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or non-profit sectors.

Authors' contributions

Methodology, investigation, resources, visualization, project administration, and writing the original draft: Ebrahim Piri; Supervision: AmirAli Jafarnezhadgero; Conceptualization, validation, review and editing: All authors.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

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