

RUPTURED ACL IN BOTH KNEES:**Should we do surgery one at a time or both in one stage?**

Overview—“My dog is limping on both back legs from cruciate disease (i.e. torn ACLs); please help me understand the condition and the possible treatment options.”

It is unfortunately relatively common for dogs to have both knees affected by cruciate disease in their lifetime; up to 50% of patients will have the second side affected after the first side is treated. (See additional handout re: cruciate disease and treatment). For a small number of these dogs, both knees are affected at the same time; this brings up the concept of performing surgery to stabilize the injured knees one at a time (with 1-2mo healing in between) or both in one stage. There are benefits and drawbacks for you to consider with each approach. There is no right answer, and the decision-making is not black and white. You will need to consider your specific situation and plan accordingly.

“What are the negative factors when considering surgery on both legs at the same time?”

Veterinary studies suggest there may be an increased risk of bone fractures or implant-related complications (i.e. implants breaking or pulling out) most requiring re-operation to correct, when surgery is performed on both knees; most of these studies have looked at small numbers so the data is not conclusive. In theory, more stress is put on the surgery site early in the postoperative period when a dog is required to walk on the operated leg (i.e. s/he cannot limp or hold it up for a few weeks when both legs are operated).

To compensate for this potential drawback, owner participation in their dog’s mobility for the first month is much more involved. Strongly suggested is a well-fitted rearlimb support harness is ready at the time of surgery (see *Help ‘em Up* harnesses online); upon discharge, the patient is supported to rise and lie down and during all walking attempts. Close confinement is required when not assisted.

Anesthesia time is longer for surgery on both legs at the same time. The potential pain and discomfort experienced is doubled. The frustration experienced by a recovering dog is more obvious due to limited mobility. Confinement is more intense and restricted.

“What are the positive factors when considering surgery on both legs at the same time?”

When surgery is performed on both knees at once, the experience of recovering from surgery only has to happen once, for patients and owners. The costs of the hospital experience are not all duplicated (i.e. medications, etc.) so overall cost is less.

“Are there other considerations when making this decision?”

Some dogs with both knees affected by cruciate disease are essentially walking on their front legs preoperatively. These dogs do not appear to have the benefit of a semi-good leg to use in the postoperative period, if one leg is done at a time, making the surgery on both legs at once a more obvious answer. (Although, these dogs still require intensive owner participation in their mobility.)

Many other dogs with knees affected do have one leg that appears better/less uncomfortable than the other. Operating the “worst” of the two first is a reasonable approach that limits some of the postoperative risks and commitments inherent to surgery on both knees at once.

It is important that you have proper expectations about this procedure; your experience and your pet’s outcome will benefit greatly. Please discuss this information with your veterinarian when working through the decision-making process regarding **bilateral cruciate surgery**.

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