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Morphology and Function of the Cruciate Ligaments

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Introduction

In contrast to the plethora of veterinary publications on cruciate surgery in dogs, only a few papers deal with the microanatomy and neurovascular anatomy of the canine cruciate ligaments. However, an understanding of the complex anatomy and function of these ligaments is imperative to elucidate the pathophysiology of cruciate ligament rupture, and to improve surgical intervention.

Morphology

Macroanatomy

The cranial cruciate ligament (CrCL) attaches to the axial aspect of the lateral femoral condyle, very close to the articular margin (Figure 1.1). It extends diagonally across the joint space and attaches to the cranial intercondyloid area of the tibial plateau (Singleton 1957; Zahm 1965; Arnoczky & Marshall 1977). The proximal attachment site is bordered cranially by the cranial meniscotibial ligament of the medial meniscus and caudally by the cranial menisco-
Figure 1.1  Photograph (A) and line drawing (B) of a flexed right stifle joint of a dog. Cranial view after removal of the infrapatellar fat pad. In panel B: 1a, caudolateral bundle of the cranial cruciate ligament; 1b, craniomedial bundle of the cranial cruciate ligament; 2, caudal cruciate ligament; 3, medial meniscus; 4, lateral meniscus; 5, tendon of the long digital extensor; 6, medial femoral condyle; 7, tibial tuberosity.

Figure 1.2  Photograph (A) and line drawing (B) of the left pelvic limb of a dog. Dorsal view on the tibial plateau after removal of the femur. In panel B: 1, cranial cruciate ligament; 2, caudal cruciate ligament; 3, medial meniscus; 4, intermeniscal ligament; 5, medial collateral ligament; 6, lateral meniscus; 7, meniscofemoral ligament; 8, popliteal tendon; 9, tendon of the long digital extensor; 10, infrapatellar fat pad; 11, patellar tendon; 12, patella.

The caudal cruciate ligament (CaCL) is slightly longer and broader than the CrCL (Rudy 1974; Arnoczky & Marshall 1977; Harari 1993). Even its collagen fibrils are thicker compared with its cranial counterpart (Brunnberg 1989). The total mid-section diameter is smallest as it fans out from the center, making the femoral and, to a lesser extent, the tibial attachments larger (Rudy 1974). In the dog the CaCL also has two components, although they are less distinct and often inseparable (Heffron & Campbell 1978; Harari 1993).

Microanatomy

The cruciate ligaments are multifascicular structures, the base unit of which is collagen, that contain many wavy fascicular subunits (Figure 1.3A). Fascicles may be composed of one up to 10 subfascicles, containing bundles of collagen fibers (Heffron & Campbell 1978; Yahia & Drouin 1989). At the osseous attachment sites of the CrCL, the collagen fibers are not arranged entirely parallel to the longitudinal axis of the ligament and, especially in younger specimens, columns of chondroid cells do penetrate into the ligament (Figure 1.3B) (Zahm 1965; Alm & Strömberg 1974). Where both cruciate ligaments are in contact, the collagen fibers are more densely packed and oriented tangential to the surface instead of parallel to the long axis (Vasseur et al. 1985). Fibers are formed by fibrils that are composed by organization of repeated collagen subunits (Alm & Strömberg 1974; Heffron & Campbell 1978; Vasseur et al. 1985). Their architecture is a combination of helical or planar, parallel, or twisted networks. The centrally located collagen fibrils are nearly straight, whereas those at the periphery are arranged in a helical wave pattern (Zahm 1965; Alm & Strömberg 1974; Yahia & Drouin 1989).

Alongside collagen, elastin fibers and bundles of microfibrils (fibrillin 1 and 2) are abundant in cruciate ligaments, both within the collagen bundles and in the interfascicular regions (Figures 1.4AB) (Smith et al. 2011). Those fibers are predominantly oriented parallel to the collagen bundles, and this study suggested a mechanical role for their distribution during ligament deformation.

As evident in other ligaments, the cruciate ligaments are characterized by relative hypocellularity. Where both cruciate ligaments are in contact, the epiligament is more cellular than anywhere else (Smith et al. 2012). In the interfascicular regions, the cells are interspersed.
between bundles of collagenous fibers. Most are interconnected by cytoplasmic projections, which often branch markedly, forming a three-dimensional cellular lattice around those fibers. Differences in cell morphology were also found in dog breeds with high and low risks of cruciate ligament rupture. CrCLs from low-risk breeds have longer cytoplasmic projections, while high-risk CrCLs have rounder nuclei and shorter cytoplasmic projections. These changes may be indicative of a reduced communication between cells (Smith et al. 2012).

Synovial envelope

Both the CrCL and the CaCL are covered by a fairly uniform fold of synovial membrane which incompletely divides the stifle joint in the sagittal plane (Arnoczky et al. 1979). These enveloping epiligamentous membranes consist mainly of dense connective tissue, small fibroblasts, and some adipocytes; an intima and a thin subintimal layer can be distinguished (Heffron & Campbell 1978). The intima is a single layer of synoviocytes, and the subintimal layer is areolar tissue containing small vascular structures (Vasseur et al. 1985). Compared with the collateral ligaments, the enveloping synovial membrane is relatively cellular (Heffron & Campbell 1978). Synovial lining does not occur on the surfaces of the cruciate ligaments that are in direct contact with each other (Vasseur et al. 1985). When examined with scanning electron microscopy, many small holes have been detected in the synovial membrane covering the cruciate ligaments, suggesting that the cruciate ligaments are also supplied with nutrients via the synovial fluid (Kobayashi et al. 2006).

Vascular supply

The major vascular contribution to the center of the stifle joint occurs from branches of the middle genicular artery, which arises from the popliteal artery, penetrates the caudal joint capsule, and passes craniodistally to the fossa intercondylaris, running cranially between the cruciate ligaments (Figures 1.5 and 1.6) (Tirgari 1978). The vascular structures in the proximal part of the CrCL are more numerous and have a larger diameter compared with those on the tibial side (Zahm 1965; Alm & Strömberg 1974).
The blood supply to both cruciate ligaments is predominantly of soft tissue origin; the contribution from the osseous attachments is negligible (Arnoczky et al. 1979; Kobayashi et al. 2006). The infrapatellar fat pad and the well-vascularized synovial membranes, which form an envelope around the cruciate ligaments, are the most important sources of vessels (Alm & Strömberg 1974; Tircari 1978; Arnoczky et al. 1979, Kobayashi et al. 2006). The synovial vessels arborize into a finely meshed network of periligamentous vessels which ensheath the cruciate ligaments throughout their entire length (Figures 1.7 and 1.8) (Arnoczky et al. 1979;
Figure 1.8 Histologic section (H&E stain) of a normal cranial cruciate ligament (CrCL) of an adult dog. (A) The CrCL is ensheathed by epiligamentous vessels (scale bar = 100 μm). (B) The well-vascularized synovial membrane (SM) forms an envelope over the CrCL (scale bar = 100 μm). 1, epiligamentous vessels; 2, anastomosis between epiligamentous and endoligamentous vessels; 3, hypovascular zone; 4, synovial vessels. Source: de Rooster et al. 2006. Reproduced with permission from John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Kobayashi et al. 2006). In general, the vascular arrangement and structural characteristics of the vasculature inside the CrCL and the CaCL are similar (Alm & Strömberg 1974; Arnoczky et al. 1979; Kobayashi et al. 2006). In the inner part of the cruciate ligaments, around and along the bundles of collagen fibers, an endoligamentous vascular network courses in the supporting connective tissue (Alm & Strömberg 1974; Arnoczky et al. 1979; Hayashi et al. 2011). The larger vessels, usually one artery accompanied by two veins, mainly course in a longitudinal direction both proximally and distally and lie parallel to the collagen fascicles (Alm & Strömberg 1974). Some of them have a tortuous path in the interfascicular areolar tissue. Only small capillaries branching from the longitudinal endoligamentous vessels run in a transverse direction, encircling collagen bundles. The core of the mid-portion of the CrCL is less well vascularized compared with the remainder of the ligament (Zahm 1965; Tirgari 1978; Arnoczky et al. 1979; Vasseur et al. 1985; Hayashi et al. 2011).

Anastomoses exist between extra- and intraligamentous blood networks (Alm & Strömberg 1974; Arnoczky et al. 1979; Kobayashi et al. 2006). Epiligamentous vessels penetrate transversely into the cruciate ligaments (Figure 1.8). Their branches ramify and anastomose with the endoligamentous vessels. There are numerous endosteal vessels at the ligamentous–osseous junctions; however, communications with intrinsic endoligamentous vessels are quite poor, especially at the tibial attachment where most of the endosteal vessels seem to terminate in subchondral loops instead of crossing the ligamentous–osseous junction (Alm & Strömberg 1974; Arnoczky et al. 1979; Kobayashi et al. 2006).

Innervation

Three major articular nerves arise from the saphenous nerve, tibial nerve, and common peroneal nerve to innervate the periarticular tissues of the canine stifle joint (Figure 1.9) (O’Connor & Woodbury 1982). The main trunk of nerve bundles is found at the femoral end of the cruciate ligaments. Other nerves may contribute afferent fibers to a variable extent to the cruciate ligaments.

In dogs, the medial articular nerve, which branches from the saphenous nerve in the mid-thigh region, provides the largest contribution to stifle joint innervation (O’Connor & Woodbury 1982). Some of its branches course through the infrapatellar fat pad to terminate within the proximal or distal attachments of the cruciate ligaments or within the meniscal poles. Other branches of the medial articular nerve pass cranially through the joint capsule to
extensively innervate the femoral attachment of the CaCL. The caudal articular nerve is variably present in dogs (O’Connor & Woodbury 1982), its branches arising either directly from the tibial nerve or from a muscular branch of the tibial nerve. The caudal articular nerve runs to the caudal aspect of the joint capsule, where it may communicate with branches of the medial articular nerve. The lateral articular nerve branches from the common peroneal nerve at the level of the fibular head, deep to the biceps femoris muscle, and supplies the lateral aspect of the stifle joint (O’Connor & Woodbury 1982).

Nerves of differing sizes are located in the richly vascularized synovial tissue covering the cruciate ligaments (Yahia et al. 1992). From this peripheral synovium, axons radiate towards the center of the ligaments (Yahia et al. 1992). Within the cruciate ligaments, most nerves course along the epiligamentous and endoligamentous blood vessels in the interfascicular areolar spaces.

Neurohistologic studies have identified various types of sensory nerve endings (receptors and free nerve endings) in the middle of the cruciate ligaments, well beneath the synovial sheath (Yahia et al. 1992). The highest number of mechanoreceptors was found in the proximal third of the CrCL, and the lowest in the distal third (Arcand et al. 2000). A high percentage of mechanoreceptors have been found in the tibia remnants of ruptured human anterior cruciate ligaments (ACLs), and it has been suggested that leaving these remnants after ACL reconstruction may be important for postoperative proprioceptive function (Sha & Zhao 2010).

**Functional anatomy**

The cruciate ligaments resist forces that would cause the tibia to translate cranially relative to the femur and, to a lesser degree, resist forces that would cause tibial rotation (Arnoczky & Marshall 1977). The two components of the CrCL are not isometric, the main difference being elongation of the craniomedial and shortening of the caudolateral component during flexion (Arnoczky & Marshall 1977; Heffron & Campbell 1978). The former is the major contributor to craniocaudal stability in stifle flexion, while the latter only contributes when the craniomedial band is damaged or severely stretched (Wingfield et al. 2000). With the stifle in extension, both components are taut, and limit cranial translation of the tibia relative to the femur (Arnoczky & Marshall 1977; Heffron & Campbell 1978).
As the stifle flexes, the cruciate ligaments are not only wrapped upon each other but also spiral on themselves (Singleton 1957; Arnoczky & Marshall 1977). The higher strain in the ligaments also limits the amount of normal internal rotation of the tibia relative to the femur (Zahm 1965; Arnoczky & Marshall 1977; Harari 1993). In extension, the medial and lateral collateral ligaments become the primary restraints of rotation, and the cruciate ligaments provide only a secondary check from the tension in both ligaments (Singleton 1957; Zahm 1965; Vasseur et al. 1985).

Both cruciate ligaments together provide important secondary restraints against varus and valgus angulation. The cruciate ligaments become primary restraints if there is loss of collateral ligament support (Vasseur & Arnoczky 1981).

Overextension is prevented by tension in the cruciate ligaments, where the CrCL acts as the primary restraint (Arnoczky & Marshall 1977; Heffron & Campbell 1978). The caudolateral component of the CrCL is the primary contributor to restraining hyperextension (Heffron & Campbell 1978). The slightly longer caudal component of the CaCL can only be considered a secondary restraint (Singleton 1957; Arnoczky & Marshall 1977).

References


Singleton WB. The diagnosis and surgical treatment of some abnormal stifle conditions in the dog. Vet Rec 1957;69:1387–1394.


