Athlete's Guide: Return to Lifting After ACL Reconstruction

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About this guide

Stay in the gym, protect the graft. This guide gives athletes and bodybuilders a muscle-group-by-muscle-group timeline for returning to lifting after ACL reconstruction. It covers two surgeries side by side:

- **ACL reconstruction alone**
- **ACL reconstruction with meniscus repair**

Your upper body, core, and other leg can keep training almost from the start. Your own timeline may differ based on your graft, what was found at surgery, and how your knee responds. Your surgical report and Dr. Jazayeri's instructions always come first.

Your surgery: what each one protects

The ACL graft sets the overall pace in both surgeries. A meniscus repair adds early limits on weight-bearing and knee bending, so the repaired cartilage can heal.

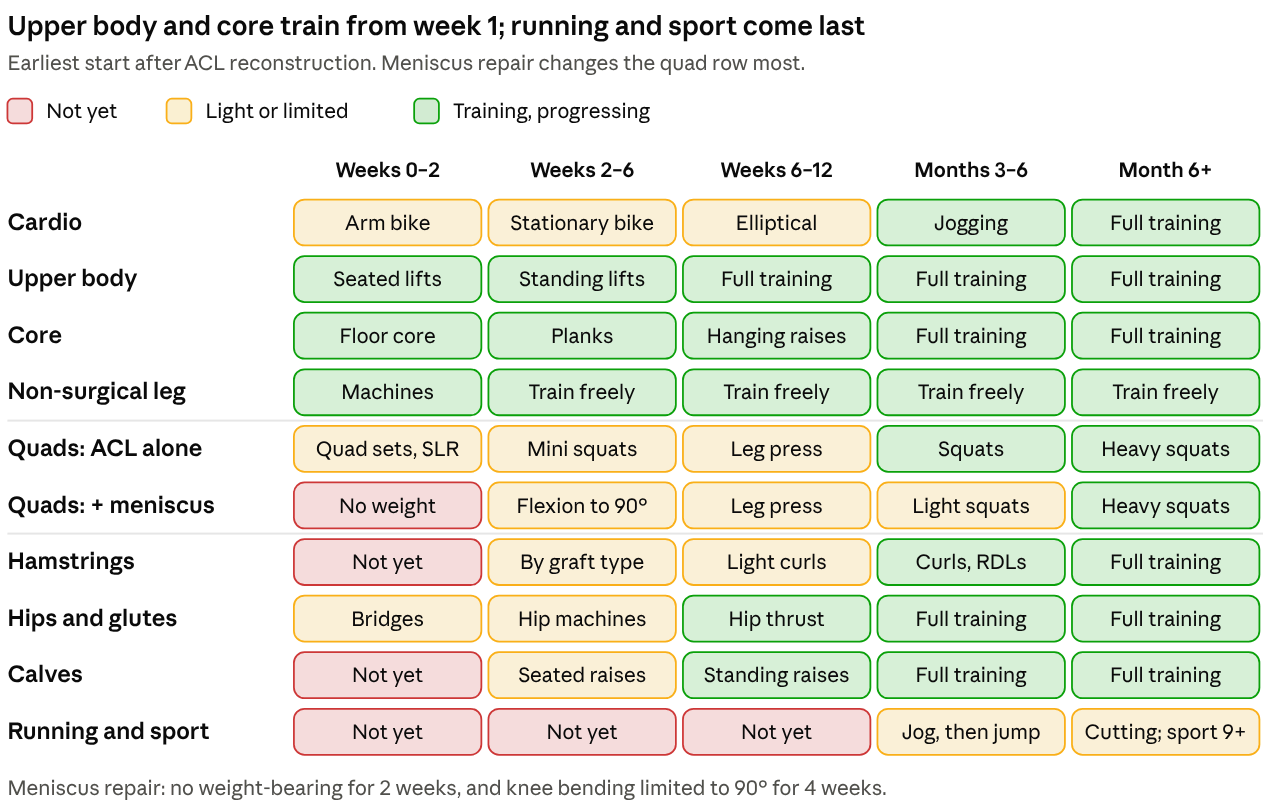
	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Weight-bearing	As tolerated from day 1, with brace and crutches	**None for the first 2 weeks**, then gradually increased

	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Knee bending	Regain motion as tolerated; full straightening is the first priority	**Limited to 90° for the first 4 weeks**
Deep loaded squats	Progress from month 3	Not below parallel with load until about month 4
Hamstring curls	Early with patellar or quad tendon graft; week 6–8 with hamstring graft	Week 8–12 (curls stress the repaired meniscus)
Return to sport	Month 9+, after testing	Month 9–12, after testing

Your graft matters. A hamstring graft delays resisted hamstring curls. A patellar tendon graft can make kneeling sore for several months.

At a glance: what you can train, and when

Your upper body, core, and other leg can train from week 1. Running, jumping, and sport come back last.



What you can train, by body part and phase · ACL alone vs. ACL + meniscus repair

Exercise timeline by body part

Times are from the day of surgery. Each one is the **earliest** start, if your knee is quiet (little swelling, no pain) and you have met the milestones below.

Cardio and conditioning

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Arm bike (seated)	Week 1	Week 1
Stationary bike, rocking then full turns	Week 2–3	Week 4–5
Pool walking (incisions healed)	Week 3–4	Week 4–6
Elliptical	Week 6–8	Week 8
Swimming, flutter kick only	Week 6–8	Week 8
Stair climber	Week 8	Week 10

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Rowing machine (deep knee bend)	Week 8–10	Week 10–12
Straight-line jogging	Month 3–4	Month 4
Breaststroke kick	Month 5	Month 5–6

Upper body

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Seated machines and dumbbells: chest press, rows, pulldowns, shoulder press, curls, triceps	Week 1	Week 1
Flat bench press (feet on the bench)	Week 1–2	Week 2
Standing upper-body lifts	Week 4–6 (off crutches)	Week 6
Pull-ups (step down, never drop)	Week 4	Week 6

Core

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Crunches, dead bugs, side planks from the knees	Week 1–2	Week 1–2
Front plank	Week 3–4	Week 4–6
Hanging leg raises, standing cable core	Week 6	Week 8

Non-surgical leg

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Single-leg extension, curl, and leg press	Week 1–2	Week 1–2

Training the healthy leg helps the surgical leg keep strength through the "cross-education" effect.

Hips and glutes

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Side-lying hip raises, hip abductor/adductor machine (pad above the knee)	Week 2	Week 2
Glute bridges, both legs	Week 1–2	Week 2
Hip thrust	Week 6	Week 6–8

Quads and hamstrings (surgical leg)

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Quad sets, straight-leg raises	Week 1	Week 1
Mini squats (0–45°), shallow wall sits	Week 2–4	Week 4–6
Leg press (0–90°)	Week 4–6	Week 6
Leg extension machine, protected arc (90–45°)	Week 6	Week 6–8
Leg extension, full range	Month 3–4	Month 4
Hamstring curls (patellar or quad tendon graft)	Week 2–4	Week 8–12
Hamstring curls (hamstring graft)	Week 6–8	Week 8–12
Bodyweight squats to 90°	Week 6–8	Week 8–10
Split squats, step-ups, lunges	Week 8–10	Week 12

Squats and deadlifts

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Romanian deadlift, light	Week 8	Week 10–12
Goblet squat	Month 3	Month 3–4

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Trap-bar deadlift	Month 3	Month 4
Barbell squat to parallel, light	Month 3–4	Month 4
Heavy or below-parallel squats	Month 6	Month 6

Calves

Exercise	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Seated calf raise	Week 2	Week 3
Standing calf raise	Week 4	Week 6

Running, jumping, and sport

Activity	ACL alone	ACL + meniscus repair
Straight-line running	Month 3–4	Month 4
Double-leg jumping, agility ladder	Month 4–5	Month 5
Cutting, pivoting, sport drills	Month 6–7	Month 7
Return to sport or competition	Month 9+, after testing	Month 9–12, after testing

Training rules

- **Swelling is your speedometer.** If the knee is more swollen the next morning, drop back a step.
- **Start every new leg exercise light**, at about 30% of your old working weight, and add no more than about 10% per week.
- **Full knee straightening comes first.** Losing extension early is hard to get back.
- **After meniscus repair, respect the 90° limit** for the first 4 weeks, including on the bike and leg press.
- **No twisting, pivoting, or jumping** until you are cleared, even if the knee feels great. The graft is weakest between about weeks 6 and 12.

- **Physical therapy comes first.** Gym work adds to your therapy; it never replaces it.

Milestones, not just dates

- **Before leaving crutches:** walking without a limp, full straightening, quad control (no lag on a straight-leg raise)
- **Before running:** little or no swelling, quad strength at least 70% of your other side, good single-leg balance
- **Before jumping and cutting:** strength at least 80% of your other side, pain-free running
- **Before sport:** strength and hop testing at least 90% of your other side, and surgeon clearance

Call the office if you notice

- Calf pain, swelling, or tenderness in the lower leg
- Fever, redness, or drainage from an incision
- The knee giving way, or a new pop with swelling
- After meniscus repair: locking or catching, or new pain along the joint line

Your Surgical Athlete plan

Protecting your muscle starts before surgery, not after it.

- **Before surgery:** Metabolic Report Card labs check hormonal, metabolic and nutritional markers, so we can fix gaps before the operation. Targeted amino acid supplements start one week before surgery. We also discuss whether peptide therapeutics fit your recovery, and set up a muscle-centric diet to limit thigh muscle loss.
- **In the operating room:** orthobiologics such as PRP or bone marrow aspirate concentrate (BMAC) may be used to support healing, when appropriate.
- **After surgery:** you keep training everything the knee allows, using the timeline above.

Let's talk openly about your training

I work with many athletes and bodybuilders, and I know anabolic steroids, peptides, and supplements are often part of the picture. That conversation is welcome in my office, without judgment. Being honest lets us plan timing, decide what to continue, taper or stop, and support healing. Please don't stop or change anything on your own before we talk.

Your comeback starts before surgery

Ready to plan your recovery? Call **1-844-JAZ-0911** or email rjassistant@docshealth.com to schedule a consultation with Dr. Jazayeri at DOCS Health in Beverly Hills or Westlake Village.

This guide is for education only and isn't a substitute for personal medical advice. Timelines vary with each injury, graft, and patient. Always follow your surgeon's and physical therapist's specific instructions.