

ACL Rehabilitation: Take-Home Milestones

A printable milestone checklist for ACL rehabilitation - from the first weeks of swelling control through strengthening and return-to-sport testing.

At a Glance

- Recovery is measured in months, and milestones matter more than dates
- Restore full knee extension early - it is the foundation of everything else
- Do not return to running, jumping or pivoting until strength and control criteria are met
- Your surgeon's and physiotherapist's protocol always takes priority

Milestones by Phase

The time ranges below are broad orientation points, not deadlines. Graft choice, associated meniscus or cartilage work, non-operative care, and your clinician's protocol can all change the sequence.

Phase 1 - Settle (often the first 1-2 weeks):

- ■ Full knee extension restored
- ■ Swelling visibly reducing
- ■ Quadriceps switching on (straight-leg holds, terminal knee extension)
- ■ Walking with a normal pattern (with crutches if needed)

Phase 2 - Restore (often the following several weeks):

- ■ Comfortable, full range of motion
- ■ Normal walking without a limp
- ■ Low-impact conditioning added only when wounds, swelling, range and your care plan allow it
- ■ Gentle strengthening without pain or swelling flare

Phase 3 - Strengthen (once the knee is quiet and basic control is restored):

- ■ Single-leg control improving (single-leg balance)
- ■ Strength is measured and progressing toward the targets set by your clinician
- ■ No swelling after exercise

Phase 4 - Return to running, training and sport:

- ■ Straight-line running pain-free
- ■ Jumping and landing tests pass
- ■ Direction change and sport drills tolerated
- ■ Formal return-to-sport testing completed
- ■ Confidence and psychological readiness considered alongside physical testing

Do This

- Keep a written log of swelling, range and how the knee feels the next day
- Progress one variable at a time - range, then strength, then speed
- Train both legs - the healthy side matters too

Avoid This

- Pivoting, jumping or cutting before testing is passed
- Skipping rehabilitation sessions
- Pushing through swelling that keeps coming back
- Chasing a calendar date instead of strength and control

When to See Someone

See your surgeon or physiotherapist if the knee locks, gives way, swells persistently, or if you cannot restore full extension in the first weeks.

References

1. Diermeier T, et al. "Treatment after anterior cruciate ligament injury: Panther Symposium ACL Treatment Consensus Group." <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7524809/>
2. AAOS. "Management of Anterior Cruciate Ligament Injuries." <https://www.aaos.org/quality/quality-programs/lower-extremity-programs/anterior-cruciate-ligament-injuries/>

This information is for education only and is not a medical diagnosis. InjuryAtlas does not replace an assessment by a qualified health professional. If you have severe pain, visible deformity, numbness, loss of function, or symptoms that are getting worse, seek medical care promptly.