

“Conservative Management:” Alternatives to Surgery for Partial ACL Tears

by Mary Jane Lakota, Trustee of the Foundation of the CTCA

If you own Cairn Terriers long enough, chances are you may be faced at some point with a diagnosis of an injury to your dog's Anterior Cruciate Ligament (ACL). Although Cairns are a sturdy breed, built for lots of physical activity, even the best-conditioned athletes can experience these injuries. In dogs, ACL injuries most commonly occur when the dog suddenly plants the hind limbs while running; the momentum of the body continues forward, rotating the tibia and tearing the ligament.

If your dog is limping, you should have your veterinarian determine the cause. There are all kinds of reasons for limping, including arthritis, Lyme disease, paw injuries, muscle sprains, bee stings, interdigital dermatitis and dislocated knee caps. But for more than one million American dogs every year, the most common cause of limping is a torn cruciate ligament, more commonly known as an ACL.

If your Cairn is diagnosed with an Anterior Cruciate Ligament injury, most vets today recommend surgery. Although surgery works well for some dogs, unfortunately operations are not always successful. And some dogs, because of age or other conditions, are not good candidates. Fortunately, there are a growing number of options available for treatment for you to consider.

This article outlines the positive experience I've had using “Conservative Management” options for the treatment of a torn ACL in one of my Cairns.

What Is a Torn ACL?

Your Cairn's knee joint (or more properly, the dog's “stifle” joint) is stabilized by a series of ligaments: the cranial and caudal cruciate ligaments, the medial and lateral collateral ligaments, and the patellar ligaments. The cranial and caudal cruciate ligaments cross over the front of the stifle joint, and are responsible for keeping the tibia from sliding too far forward, or too far backward, respectively. The medial and lateral collateral ligaments lie on either side of the knee and to stabilize the sides of the joint. The patellar ligaments are those that hold the patella, or kneecap, in place and allow for its movement when extending and flexing the knee.



A ruptured anterior cruciate ligament is the most common orthopedic injury in dogs. It results in a painful and unstable joint. If not treated immediately, most ACL injuries appear to improve with rest, but the knee remains swollen and abnormal wear between bones and cartilage creates degenerative changes that result in bone spurs, chronic pain, loss of motion, and arthritis, leading to progressive and irreversible degenerative joint disease.

How Is an ACL Tear Diagnosed?

Nearly all dogs with damage to their cruciate ligament will have swelling or inflammation in the joint that can be felt on the front part of their knee.

During an exam, your veterinarian will do a “drawer test.” The veterinarian stabilizes the femur with one hand and manipulates the tibia with the other hand. If the tibia moves forward (like a drawer being opened), the cruciate ligament is either torn or fully ruptured.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine whether the ligament is fully ruptured or only partially torn during this examination. A definitive diagnosis of the extent of the tear almost always requires exploratory surgery. However, you may want to try other options for several months before choosing that option.

Our Experience with “Conservative Management”

When our 14-year-old Cairn Terrier experienced a partial tear of her Anterior Cruciate Ligament, our vet recommended we see a surgeon. I then went looking for alternatives and discovered the term “Conservative Management” in a veterinary textbook.

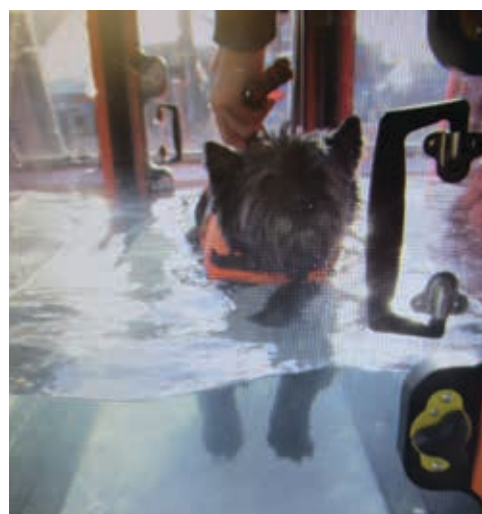
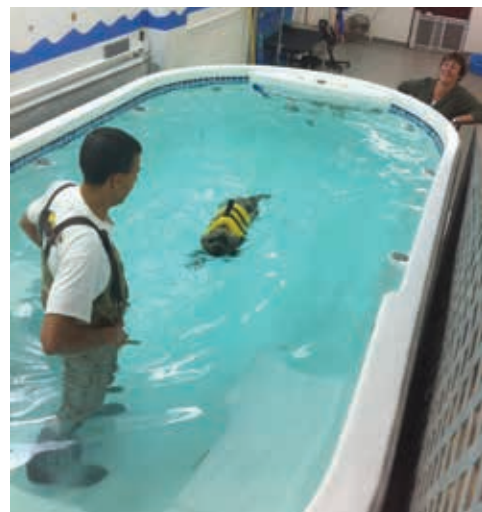
“Conservative Management” was described as an alternative to surgery. This non-surgical approach has already helped thousands of dogs recover from ACL injuries and is growing in popularity. We decided to give this approach a try.

“Conservative Management” consists of a number of non-surgical treatment of injuries such as:

- Carefully Monitored Activity: Keep a dog with a ligament injury quiet and confined. Discontinue jumping and walks in the early stages of recovery.
- Canine Chiropractic adjustments: Chiropractic treatments can realign the dog’s skeleton to avoid the strain that may have caused the initial ligament tear. This is often used to treat dogs with arthritis, joint inflammation, chronic back pain and even serious spinal cord conditions. Many veterinarians offer this service or know of a Canine Chiropractic Therapist.
- Canine Massage: Massage increases the blood flow around and at the site of injury to aid healing. Massage therapy relieves tension in muscles and joints. During massage therapy, the therapist is also likely to perform joint therapy, a technique to improve joint health and improve range of motion significantly. Joint therapy relieves joint pain and improves the health and mobility of the joint capsule. This supplies the joint with nutrition. This therapy is very important in reversing the discomfort caused by arthritis or to relieve inflammation, after injury or surgery. To find a qualified Massage Therapist in your area perform an internet search for Canine Massage.
- Canine Nutrition: Weight loss for over-weight dogs is very important in the treatment of ACL injuries. Base your choice of food on your dog’s needs, (senior, weight-related, and so on). I recommend switching food flavors around to keep your pup interested; just like us, they love new tastes. I also found a hip and joint supplement that had a complex with MSM to help aid in her healing.
- Veterinary Acupuncture: Acupuncture stimulates the release of the body’s own pain-relieving

anti-inflammatory substances. In addition, acupuncture improves tissue blood flow, oxygenation, and removal of metabolic wastes and toxins, unlike prescription and over-the-counter pain meds. Acupuncture lacks potential side effects for your pet’s internal organs and can benefit all life stages and a variety of conditions.

- Prolong Therapy: Your local Canine Rehabilitation Center or Canine Gym may offer a fitness program. Canine Physical Therapists offering these classes can be found by performing an internet search for Canine fitness programs. If none are available, you’ll need to design a program for your Cairn that includes walks, structured strengthening, and stabilizing exercises. These exercises encourage your pet to place some weight on the affected limb, building muscle in that area and increase coordination.
- Hydro Therapy: This form of therapy uses water as a tool to improve muscle and joint function. Some places offer underwater treadmills and also heated pools. Walking through water on a treadmill or swimming allows your pet to work several muscles at once while stretching further than walking on land would allow. The underwater treadmill provides the benefits of land exercises while decreasing the weight placed on the patient’s limbs. Hydro therapy is extremely effective in improving muscle strength, endurance, cardio respiratory endurance, range of motion and agility. It is a great way to increase function and mobility of joints and muscles in dogs.
- Cold Laser: Laser therapy is used to break up existing inflammation allowing the body to heal. The Cold Laser technique is a noninvasive procedure that uses light to stimulate cell regeneration and increase blood circulation. Cold Laser can be used in addition to massage. Laser techniques can treat acute and chronic injuries: sprains, strains, arthritis, swelling, spinal problems and musculoskeletal abnormalities. It also helps to regenerate nerve tissue after surgery.



Advocates of the “Conservative Management” recommend that non-surgical techniques be tried for eight weeks for partial ACL tears. If symptoms improve during this time, as our Cairn Terrier’s did, they say odds favor an ACL recovery without surgery.

A time commitment is essential to design and implement a successful program. But you know your pet’s needs; computers are at your fingertips. Investigate the resources available in your area to help you create a program to meet your dog’s individual needs. These Cairns are our responsibility. They are with us for such a short time. Make it a great time. Based on our positive experience, I believe you and your pup will be once again enjoying each other’s company with no pain or discomfort.

Editor’s Note: The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not express the views or opinions of the Cairn Terrier Club of America.