

# Arthroscopic ACLR (Hamstring Autograft) Protocol

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## General Principles and Precautions

- **Donor Site Protection:** The hamstring harvest site is vulnerable to strain in the first 6 weeks. **No resisted hamstring curls** are permitted until Week 8 to allow the donor tendons to "re-generate" and the muscle belly to heal.
- **The "Extension First" Rule:** Achieving 0 degrees of extension (matching the unininvolved side) is the highest priority in the first 2 weeks.
- **Graft Protection:** Avoid resisted open-chain knee extension (e.g., leg extension machine) from 0 to 40 degrees for the first 12 weeks to minimize shear stress on the new graft.

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## Phase I: Immediate Post-Operative / Protection (Weeks 0–2)

**Goals:** Full terminal extension, edema control, and quadriceps "re-education."

- **Brace Use:** Brace locked in full extension (0 degrees) for all ambulation and sleep.
- **Weight-Bearing:** Weight-Bearing As Tolerated (WBAT) with crutches.
- **Range of Motion:**
  - **Extension:** Goal is 0 degrees (matching opposite side) by day 7. Use prone hangs and towel rolls under the heel.
  - **Flexion:** Gradual progression as pain allows.
- **Exercises:**
  - **Quadriceps Activation:** Quad sets and Straight Leg Raises (SLR) in the brace. **No lag** must be present during SLR.
  - **Patellar Mobilizations:** Essential to prevent infrapatellar contracture.
  - **Ankle Pumps:** daily to prevent DVT.
- **Restriction:** Strictly avoid active hamstring contraction or stretching.

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## Phase II: Early Mobilization (Weeks 2–6)

**Goals:** Normalize gait, progress flexion to 90 degrees, and initiate bilateral strengthening.

- **Brace:** Brace is typically opened to allow ROM during gait once the patient demonstrates superior quad control (No SLR lag). Wean from the brace by week 4 to 6.
- **Motion Progression:**
  - **Flexion Goal:** Reach **90 degrees** by the end of Week 6.
  - **Stationary Bike:** Begin when flexion reaches 90 degrees. Start with no resistance and high seat height.
- **Strengthening (Bilateral Closed-Chain Only):**
  - **Mini-Squats:** 0 to 45 degrees.
  - **Leg Press:** 0 to 60 degrees (low weight/high reps).
  - **Proprioception:** Double-leg balance on stable surfaces.
- **Precautions:** **No lateral movements, No single-leg loading, and No resisted hamstring curls.**

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## Phase III: Intermediate Strengthening (Weeks 6–12)

**Goals:** Progress flexion to 120 degrees and build bilateral eccentric strength.

- **Motion Progression:**
  - **Flexion Goal:** Reach **120 degrees** by the end of Week 12.
- **Strengthening:**
  - **Bilateral Focus:** Continue progressive bilateral leg press and squats.
  - **Hamstrings (Initiate Week 8):** Begin gentle active-only hamstring curls (no resistance). Transition to very light resistance bands at Week 10.
  - **Step-Ups:** Focus on slow, controlled eccentric lowering.
- **Precautions:** **No lateral movements or single-leg loading** until the completion of week 12.

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## Phase IV: Advanced Loading & Transition to Sport (Weeks 12–16+)

**Goals:** Achieve full flexion, initiate single-leg tasks, and return to impact.

- **Motion Progression:**
  - **Flexion Goal:** Reach **Full Flexion** by Week 16.

- **Strengthening (Initiate Week 12+):**
  - **Lateral Movements:** Initiate side-steps, monster walks, and lateral shuffles.
  - **Single-Leg Loading:** Begin single-leg squats, step-ups, and Bulgarian split squats.
  - **Hamstrings:** Progress to resisted curls and Romanian Deadlifts (RDLs) with light weights.
- **Criteria to Begin Running (Typically Week 16+):**
  - Full ROM and no joint effusion.
  - Quadriceps strength at least 75 percent of the uninvolved side.
- **Progression:**
  - **Agility:** Figure-8s and shuttle runs.
  - **Plyometrics:** Box jumps (focus on landing mechanics) and bilateral jumping.

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## Phase V: Return to Sport (Weeks 24+)

- **Contact Sports:** Typically 6 to 9 months, contingent on passing functional testing.
- **Discharge Criteria:** Quadriceps and Hamstring strength greater than 90 percent of the uninvolved side; Limb Symmetry Index (LSI) > 90 percent on hop testing.

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## Clinical Pearls for the Therapist

1. **Hamstring "Snap":** Warn patients that they may feel a "snap" or "pop" in the back of the thigh (hamstring strain) if they reach too quickly or try to pull their heel toward their buttock in the first 4 weeks.
2. **The "Extension Lag":** If the patient cannot perform a Straight Leg Raise without the knee bending, they must continue to use the brace locked in extension for ambulation to prevent a permanent extension deficit.
3. **Flexion Pacing:** We are intentionally pacing flexion (90 degrees at 6 weeks; 120 degrees at 12 weeks) to protect the healing ACL graft and the medial hamstring harvest site.