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Case Report

Avulsion fracture of the tibial eminence in an adult with a unique mechanism of injury[☆]

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 April 2018

Revised 20 May 2018

Accepted 23 May 2018

Keywords:

ACL avulsion

Tibial eminence

MRI

Knee arthroscopy

ABSTRACT

Tibial eminence avulsion fractures are not infrequent in the pediatric population; however, they are rare in the adult population. These injuries typically occur in skeletally immature patients between the ages of 8 and 14 years. We report the unique clinical history, imaging findings, and operative results of a 48-year-old female who presented with severe knee pain. Imaging findings revealed an anterior tibial eminence fracture with an intact anterior cruciate ligament tendon attached to the avulsed fragment. The patient underwent knee arthroscopy, with direct repair of the tibial eminence fracture.

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Introduction

The magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) appearance and the clinical presentation of anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) avulsion fractures in skeletally immature patients is well documented in the literature [1–4]. These injuries are commonly encountered in children between the ages of 8 and 14 years, and are usually sports-related injuries occurring especially during cycling and skiing [5]. In skeletally mature patients, ACL avulsion fractures are extremely unusual; and are commonly secondary to high velocity motor vehicle trauma [6]. In the adult population ACL avulsion fractures have a high incidence of associated injuries [5,6].

We present the atypical mechanism of injury, imaging findings, and operative technique of a 48-year-old female with an ACL avulsion of the anterior tibial eminence. According to our literature search, only 9 cases of ACL avulsions of the anterior tibial eminence in skeletally mature patients have been reported [7].

Case report

A 48-year-old female presented with severe left knee pain. She was out of town on a “team building” program that involved go-cart racing. While she was racing with her colleagues she

[☆] The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.radcr.2018.05.015>

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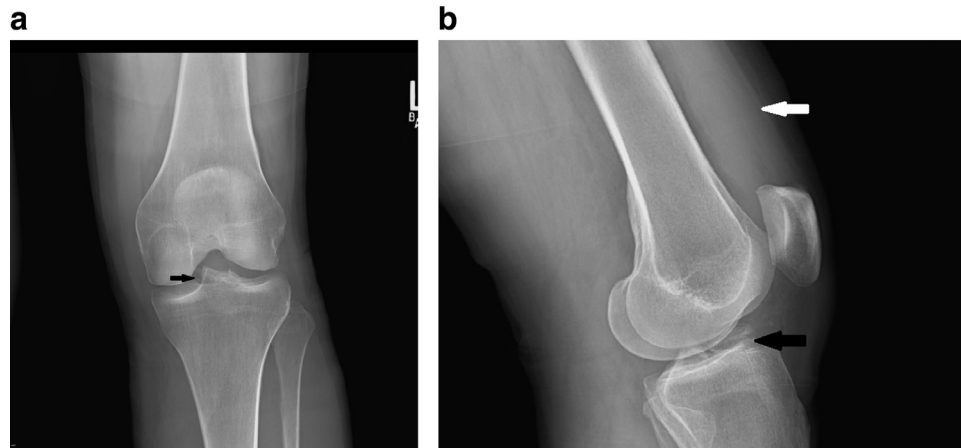


Fig. 1 – A 48-year-old female who presented with severe knee pain. Preliminary (a) AP view and (b) lateral view of the left knee were obtained demonstrating an avulsion fracture of the tibial eminence (black arrow). The lateral view (b) revealed a moderate size knee joint effusion (white arrow). AP, anteroposterior.

lost control of the go-cart and crashed into a wall. After the injury, she was evaluated at a local health care facility. She was told that she had internal derangement, and was instructed to follow-up with a local orthopedic surgeon. Additional clinical history revealed that she was not ejected from the go-cart and did not sustain direct blunt force trauma to her knee. While bracing for the crash, she had locked her knee in extension. Immediately after the collision, her knee was swollen and painful. She denied a history of previous knee injuries or surgeries.

Physical examination demonstrated moderate left knee effusion. She tolerated gentle range of motion from 0° to 80°. She had no opening varus or valgus stress, but did have a positive Lachman test. The orthopedic surgeon suspected an ACL tear. A preliminary two view x-ray examination of the left knee was obtained and surprisingly demonstrated a medial tibial eminence fracture (Figs. 1a and b). The fracture was minimally displaced, and there was a small knee joint effusion noted (Fig. 1b). The patient subsequently underwent an MRI with a presumed diagnosis of ACL avulsion of the tibial eminence. MRI of the left knee revealed a tibial eminence avulsion fracture with preservation of the integrity of the ACL fibers (Figs. 2a–c). The fracture involved the ACL insertion on medial tibial spine. The posterior cruciate ligament was intact with sparing of lateral tibial spine. Additional findings included a medial meniscus tear (Fig. 2d). MRI revealed that the medial collateral ligament, lateral stabilizing structures, and lateral meniscus were unimpaired.

Ten days after the initial event, the patient underwent arthroscopic surgery. Direct arthroscopic visualization confirmed the integrity of the ACL fibers attached to a single avulsed fragment (Fig. 3a). Utilizing a suture pass technique with a Hewson suture passer, the medial tibial eminence fracture was reduced (Fig. 3b). A complex flap tear of the medial meniscus was also repaired. The knee was evaluated arthroscopically and it was determined that anatomic restoration was achieved (Fig. 3c). Eleven days postoperatively, her examination demonstrated increased stability of the knee.

Postoperative x-rays confirmed anatomic alignment of the tibial eminence (Figs. 4a and b).

Discussion

The ACL is attached to the tibia via a broad depressed area anteriorly, including the anterior tibial eminence [8]. Avulsion fractures of the tibial eminence, first described by Poncet in 1875, are not an infrequent intra-articular knee injury in the pediatric population [9]. They can result from similar mechanisms of injuries as ACL tears in adults [5]. In children, this injury usually occurs secondary to forced flexion of the knee with internal rotation of the tibia and is typically an isolated knee injury [1–5].

The mechanism of injury often varies between children and adults [6]. Between the ages of 14 and 16, there is transformation of chondroepiphyseal junction which ossifies and fuses at the site of the ACL tibial insertion [1,10]. Once this transformation occurs, the ACL typically lacks the tensile strength to avulse the skeletally mature tibial ACL attachment. After this age, high-energy forces applied to the knee will overcome the ultimate tensile strength; this applied tension results in disruption of the ACL fibers [11]. In skeletally mature adults, overcoming the tensile bone strength at the ACL attachment requires high-energy trauma. The most common mechanism of injury is severe hyperextension, usually associated with high speed motor vehicle collisions [5,6]. Consequently, adults with tibial eminence fractures have a higher prevalence of associated injuries, including “kissing” bone contusions and tears of the medial collateral ligament, meniscus, and posterior cruciate ligament [6,12].

With regard to imaging findings, it is crucial for the radiologist to identify the ACL avulsion injury in these patients so that they may be worked up appropriately, including consultation with an orthopedic surgeon and additional imaging as circumstances dictate [12,13]. ACL avulsion fractures of-

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