

Surf's Up!

Multi-ligament Knee Reconstruction Helps DC Architect Ride the Waves

Surfing fanatic Spiro was looking forward to a trip to the world-class beaches of Nicaragua when disaster struck. Playing in a local football game, the 25-year-old architect took a hard hit and felt a familiar pop and snap in his right knee. Thinking he'd suffered a repeat of an old anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury, he went home and put on a soft leg cast to immobilize his knee and keep it straight.

With the Nicaragua trip less than a year away, Spiro was determined to recover in time. His injury was worse than he thought, however. In the days that followed, his knee felt increasingly unstable and the pain did not let up. Spiro needed a specialist, but he wasn't sure where to turn.

He got lucky in a Metro station. "I was waiting for the train and heard a familiar 'clink, clink, clink' on the platform," Spiro recalls. "A young woman was coming toward me. She was on her crutches, I was on my crutches, and we started talking. It turned out she was a dancer with the Washington Ballet who just had knee surgery at Commonwealth Orthopaedics."

Spiro got two phone numbers that day – one for the ballerina and one for Christopher Annunziata, MD, a Commonwealth surgeon with expertise in complex ligament and revision reconstruction. Dr. Annunziata diagnosed a multi-ligament injury. In addition to the ACL tear, Spiro had torn his medial collateral ligament (MCL) and damaged some cartilage. He would need a complex reconstruction procedure to fix all the injuries at once.

"Multi-ligament knee injuries are fairly rare and tend to occur in sports where people are struck or tackled, such as football, or from skiing or automobile accidents," Dr. Annunziata explains. "This is not your typical weekend warrior with a hurt knee. It's a complex injury pattern that includes pain, swelling and lack of control of the limb, and demands good clinical acumen to recognize."

The sooner the injury is treated, the better the results. But it's crucial the surgeon take the time to determine exactly what's wrong before undertaking any repair procedure. "These injuries more than any



Spiro was determined to surf the beaches of Nicaragua after multi-ligament knee injuries, and he did!



Chris Annunziata, MD, earned a BS from Boston College before graduating with his medical degree from Georgetown University. He completed an orthopaedic surgery residency at Georgetown University Medical Center and went on to complete a fellowship in Sports Medicine/Knee and Shoulder Surgery at the University of Pittsburgh Sports Medicine Center.



Ben W. Kittredge, IV, MD earned an undergraduate degree from the University of Virginia and a Masters degree in Physiology from Georgetown University. Dr. Kittredge returned to the University of Virginia to attain his medical degree. He then completed a general surgery internship at Roanoke Memorial Hospital and an orthopaedic residency at the University of Virginia. Additionally, Dr. Kittredge completed a fellowship in sports medicine at Jefferson Medical College and Pennsylvania Hospital in Philadelphia.

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other require meticulous planning beforehand to know what you are getting into,” says Ben Kittredge, MD, a Commonwealth surgeon who performs multi-ligament repair and reconstruction. “From a very careful physical exam to reading the MRI properly to determining whether there is a vascular problem or arterial injury – it’s important to have a well thought-out plan, so there are no surprises during surgery.”

Following his reconstruction procedure, Spiro had just one goal in mind: to be able to surf again in seven months. He launched an all-out recovery effort, starting with physical therapy to regain flexibility, stability and strength, and gradually adding daily biking, weight training, and treadmill workouts. With the trip just six weeks away, he had regained 80% of his muscle strength and asked Dr. Annunziata to clear him for surfing. “He told me he’d never seen a faster recovery but warned that I was still fragile and shouldn’t risk it,” Spiro says. “I told him I would do whatever it takes – I was absolutely determined to go.”

That doggedness paid off and Spiro was able to make the trip to Nicaragua. Despite the stress on his knees, he surfed every wave he could and came back in one piece with no aches or pains. “Surfing is an unbelievably addictive feeling within the purest sport. It’s just as physically challenging as mentally intensive, and adding the element of water and not being able to breathe when held under takes the reward to another level,” he says.

Dr. Annunziata, whom Spiro calls an “inspirational doctor,” says it’s Commonwealth’s team approach that ensures such exceptional care for complex multi-ligament injuries. “We have the resources and technical ability to provide truly coordinated care. From our fellowship-trained orthopaedic surgeons to our highly skilled physical therapists and bracing and orthotics experts, we treat these injuries as quickly as possible for the best results.”

One-Stop Shopping for Medical Equipment

Following his surgery, Spiro took home several pieces of durable medical equipment (DME) to help with his recovery. Items included custom-fitted knee braces, a neoprene sleeve for compressive support, and a cold therapy unit.

Thanks to Commonwealth’s convenient on-site DME program, Spiro got everything he needed before he left the hospital. “It’s one-stop shopping for patients,” says Lisa Wallwork, Director of DME. “They don’t have to visit a medical supply store or worry about insurance reimbursement. We take care of all of that up front and in house – from providing the equipment and training to billing the insurance company.”

Commonwealth’s DME program is one of the strongest and most cohesive in the region. Highly qualified technicians ensure patients receive top quality equipment – from off-the-shelf items for common orthopaedic conditions such as carpal tunnel syndrome, arthritis and sports-related injuries, to custom-fitted braces, splints, and boots.

Most of these items are covered by insurance. But some, like Spiro’s cold therapy unit – which circulates ice water around the injury site via a motorized pump – are “luxury items” that patients choose to purchase.

Commonwealth’s thriving program continues to grow. Later this year, it will add a customized orthotics service. “We are definitely a leader in on-site DME,” Wallwork says. “Other organizations reach out to us for guidance in setting up their own programs.”

Here are three common DME products for knee injuries:



T-SCOPE: Post-op Range of Motion Brace



KODIAK: Cold Therapy Unit with Pad



FUSION: Brace for Activities of Daily Living