Magnetic resonance imaging of ankle ligaments: A pictorial essay

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Abstract

Ankle trauma is commonly encountered and is most often a sprain injury affecting the ligaments. Accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment rest on knowledge of complex ligamentous anatomy of ankle and the entire spectrum of pathologies. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is the imaging modality of choice for diagnosing ligament pathologies because of its multiplanar capability and high soft tissue contrast. With MRI, it is possible to triage and attribute the cause of post traumatic ankle pain to bone, ligament, or tendon pathologies, which otherwise overlap clinically. In this pictorial essay, emphasis is given to the intricate and unique anatomy and orientation of ankle ligaments. Pathologies of ankle ligaments have been elaborated.

Key words: Ankle ligaments; magnetic resonance imaging; sprain; tear

Introduction

Ankle is a complex mechanism consisting of two joints: the true ankle joint and the subtalar joint. The true ankle joint is composed of three bones, seen from the front: tibia medially; fibula laterally; and talus inferiorly. The true ankle joint is responsible for dorsiflexion and plantar flexion of the foot. Below the true ankle joint is the subtalar joint, composed of calcaneum inferiorly, and talus superiorly. The subtalar joint is responsible for inversion and eversion of the foot.

The two joints are supported and maintained by ligaments, each connecting two bones and the tendons. Injury to the ankle joint is a common emergency and usually a sprain related to sports, walking, fall, or road traffic accident. In ankle sprain, ligaments are frequently injured in association with bone fractures, avulsion, and contusions.

Imaging protocol

The sequences and parameters for optimal high resolution images are described in Table 1.

Anatomy

There are three major groups of ligaments supporting the ankle joint: lateral, medial or deltoid (superficial and deep component) and syndesmotic.

Sketch diagrams representing these groups are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Lateral ligaments

Anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL), Posterior talofibular ligament (PTFL), and Calcaneofibular ligament (CFL) [Figure 3A and B]. Use of oblique coronal plane (CFL view) helps in better evaluation of anatomy and pathology (injury) of CFL as compared to orthogonal plane.[1]
Normal thickness of ATFL is 2–3 mm, and CFL is 2 mm.

**Medial or deltoid ligaments**

*Superficial component of deltoid ligament*

Tibiocalcaneal ligament (TCL), Tibionavicular ligament (TNL), and Tibiospring ligament (TSL) [Figures 4 and 5].

*Deep component of deltoid ligament*

Anterior tibiotalar ligament (ATTL) and Posterior tibiotalar ligament (PTTL) [Figure 6].

Normal thickness of TNL is 1–2 mm, and TSL is 2 mm (1–4mm). The PTTL is thickest ligament and normally measures 6–11 mm.

**Syndesmotic ligaments**

Anteroinferior tibiofibular ligament (AITFL), Posteroinferior tibiofibular ligament (PITFL), Interosseous membrane or ligament (IOL), and Inferior transverse (ITL). Of these AITFL and PITFL can be easily identified on routine MRI [Figure 7]. Anterior and posterior inferior tibiofibular ligaments are injured simultaneously. A 45° oblique plane is superior in demonstrating their normal integrity/pathologies as compared to orthogonal imaging. Fluid in Tibiofibular recess normally measures 5–7 mm.

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**Figure 1:** Lateral ligament complex: Anterior and posterior talofibular ligaments (yellow color) and calcaneofibular ligament (blue color). Syndesmotic ligaments: Anterior and posterior inferior tibiofibular ligaments (pink color)

**Figure 2:** Medial deltoid ligament complex: Superficial deltoid: Tibiocalcaneal ligament (orange color), Tibionavicular ligament (pink color). Deep deltoid: Anterior and posterior tibiotalar ligaments (blue color)

**Figure 3 (A):** Lateral ligaments: Anterior talofibular ligament and posterior talofibular ligament best identified on axial images, where talar dome (T) is oblong, fibula (F) is ‘C’/crescent shaped. Normal anterior talofibular ligament (pink arrow): Anterolateral tip of lateral malleolus to the neck of talus. Commonly injured. Normal posterior talofibular ligament (blue arrow): Malleolar fossa of lateral malleolus to lateral tubercle of talus. Intracapsular, extrasynovial, strongest, deepest, and least injured of lateral ligaments. Normal calcaneofibular ligament (yellow arrow): Tip of lateral malleolus to trochlear eminence of calcaneum, medial to the peroneal tendons (green arrow), and adjacent to the calcaneum (C)

**Figure 3 (B):** Sagittal proton density fat-saturated image showing anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL): Orange arrow and posterior talofibular ligament (PTFL): Yellow arrow. F: Fibula and T: Talus
In addition to these, the ankle is supported by the spring ligament. The spring ligament complex consists of superomedial (SM), medioplantar oblique (MPO), and inferoplantar longitudinal (IPL) components [Figures 8 and 9]. Normal thickness of SM component is 3 mm (2–5 mm), and IPL component is 4 mm (2–6 mm).

**Pathology**

Ligaments connect two bones; have higher proteoglycan and water content and less collagen. Normal ligaments...
Figure 8: Spring ligament complex includes the Superomedial, Medioplantar, and Inferoplantar longitudinal components. Normal superomedial component of the spring ligament: From sustentaculum tali (pink arrow) to superior and posteromedial aspect of navicular bone (blue arrows). In association with tibiospring ligament, it primarily stabilizes talocalcaneonavicular joint and secondarily stabilizes medial plantar arch of foot. Tibialis posterior tendon tendinosis (yellow arrow).

Figure 9: Normal medioplantar oblique component of the spring ligament (yellow arrow): From coronoid fossa of calcaneum (C) to tuberosity of navicular bone. Normal inferoplantar longitudinal component of the spring ligament (red arrow): From coronoid fossa of calcaneum (C) to beak of navicular bone.

Figure 10: Interstitial tear of anterior tibiotalar ligament (green arrow) and posterior tibiotalar ligament (yellow arrow). Hyperintense signal seen within these ligaments due to the presence of edema or hemorrhage.

Figure 11: Partial tear of superomedial component of the spring ligament (green arrow). Seen as partial discontinuity, not involving the entire thickness of ligament. Associated tibialis posterior tendinosis (yellow arrow).

are seen as uniform low-intensity band on T1 and T2 W images. Notable exceptions include posterior talofibular,
deep components of the deltoid ligament, and anterior inferior tibiofibular ligament that show heterogeneous signal and striations because of the interspersed fat between their fascicles.

Following acute injury the ligament undergoes repair in three stages. The first three days are characterized by inflammation, interstitial edema, and hemorrhage. The third to fifth days represent stage of repair with proliferation of fibroblasts. The second to fourth weeks are the stage of remodeling with formation of collagen. Periarticular edema is seen up to the seventh week.

**Acute Injury**

MRI shows blurred margins, irregular contours, discontinuous/wavy/lax fibers, inhomogeneous signal, or loss of normal hypointense signal within the ligament. Certain ligaments such as PTFL, deep components of the deltoid ligament, and AITFL show loss of normal striations due to presence of edema and hemorrhage. The ligament may be attenuated, thick, thin, or elongated.

Acute ligament injuries can be graded as interstitial, partial, or complete tear.

**Interstitial tears**

Hyperintense signal within the ligament on PD and T2W images due to presence of edema or hemorrhage [Figure 10].

**Partial tears**

Partial discontinuity of ligaments reaching up to the surface but not involving the entire thickness of ligament [Figure 11].

**Complete tears**

Discontinuity involving the entire thickness of ligament and is seen as fluid filled defect and retraction [Figures 12 and 13]. Joint effusion and obliteration of adjacent fat planes can be seen.

Ankle sprain contributes to 20–40% of sport injuries. Depending on the mechanism of injuries, particular group of ligaments are injured.

Inversion injury accounts for 85% of ankle sprain and is commonly seen with high velocity sports such as basketball, soccer, and football. Inversion injury commonly affects the lateral ligament complex. Of these, ATFL being the...
weakest is more prone to injury\cite{8} [Figure 14]. Injury to ATFL is less common at the talar attachment because of the denser fibrocartilage and greater bone density than that of the fibular attachment\cite{9}.

Eversion injuries commonly affect the medial deltoid ligament complex, accounting for approximately 5%...
of ankle sprains and are associated with sports such as gymnastic, rugby, and soccer.\[10,11\]

High ankle/syndesmotic sprains account for 7% of routine ankle sprains and 40% of injuries in athletes. These are more often seen in association with sports such as football, ice hockey, soccer, skiing, running, and jumping.\[12,13\] Fluid in the tibiofibular recess measuring >12 mm is definitely abnormal and suggestive of acute injury to syndesmotic ligaments or high ankle sprains\[14,15\] [Figure 15].

**Impingement Syndrome**

Anatomical variations of the ligaments alter joint mechanics, thus, making the individual prone to repeated injuries and chronic instability.\[16\] Anterolateral and medial impingement syndromes are the result of such chronic repetitive stress; these can be adequately diagnosed on MRI.

In chronic ATFL tear, granulation/scar tissue or fibrosis in the anterolateral gutter resembles a “meniscus” and can lead to clinical anterolateral impingement syndrome [Figure 16]. Similar findings can be seen in anteromedial and posteromedial impingement syndromes [Figure 17].

Post contrast fat-suppressed 3D-FSPGR (3D fast spoiled gradient echo recalled acquisition in the steady state) sequence of the ankle is superior and accurate in assessing anterolateral impingement syndrome by better delineation of synovial thickening/inflammation and granulation tissue.\[8\]

**Important Associations**

Ligaments and adjacent tendons have synergistic functions, and their injuries are most often simultaneous. Peroneal tendinosis is commonly seen with ATFL injury followed by CFL and PTFL injury\[17\] [Figure 12]. Partial longitudinal tear of peroneus brevis tendon is commonly associated with lateral ankle sprain.\[18\] Tibialis posterior tendon injuries are seen simultaneously with tibiospring and spring ligament complex injuries because of their synergistic action in maintaining the medial plantar arch\[19,20\] [Figures 18 and 19]. Bone contusion, osteochondral lesion, and joint effusion are other common associations [Figure 19].

**Conclusion**

Knowledge of anatomy and imaging appearance of normal and abnormal ankle ligaments on MRI with an understanding of biomechanics of injury aids in achieving accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment of ankle injuries.

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**Figure 18:** Synergistic action of tibialis posterior tendon, tibiospring ligament, and superomedial component of the spring ligament complex in maintaining the medial plantar arch. Partial tear of tibiospring ligament (pink dotted line and arrow), sprain of superomedial component of spring ligament (gray curved line and green arrow). Tibialis posterior tendinosis and partial interstitial tear (black arrow). Normal flexor digitorum longus tendon (yellow arrow). M: Medial malleolus of Tibia, ST-C: Sustentaculum tali of calcaneum, T: Talus

**Figure 19:** Bone contusions in medial malleolus (MM), joint effusion, and Tibialis posterior tendinosis (yellow arrows) associated with tear involving the deep Deltoid - posterior tibiotalar ligament (red arrow) and superficial Deltoid - tibiocalcaneal ligament (orange arrow) and tibiospring ligament (green arrow). T: Talus
sprains. Depending on the MRI features and the clinical co-relates (Drawers test, inversion and eversion tests), it is possible for the clinicians to grade the ankle injury from mild to severe and also assess instability. Most of the ankle sprains are stable and are treated conservatively (rest, immobilization, ice compression, and elevation). Those associated with osteochondral lesions are treated with arthroscopic repair. Severe ankle sprain injuries with instability are treated with surgical reconstruction of ligaments.

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**Conflicts of interest**
There are no conflicts of interest.

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