Anatomo-arthroscopic approach of the lateral ligament complex of the ankle

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Abstract

Injuries of the lateral ligament complex of the ankle have become increasingly frequent over the last years due to increase in sports practice among the population. These injuries present with good outcomes when treated conservatively. However, 20-25% of patients experience persistent pain or instability and should be approached surgically. Countless open surgical techniques have been published over the last 50 years. Currently knowledge on superficial, deep, and arthroscopic anatomy of ankle has allowed for the development of completely arthroscopic procedures to treat chronic lateral instability of the ankle.

The aim of this article is to describe the superficial and deep anatomy of lateral ligament complex of the ankle, specifically from the arthroscopic point of view, for it to be applied to the multiple currently described surgical procedures.

Level of Evidence III; Therapeutic Studies; Comparative Retrospective Study.

Keywords: Arthroscopy; Ankle injuries; Lateral ligament, ankle; Fractures, bone.

Introduction

Injuries of the lateral ligament complex of the ankle are frequent in athletes, and numerous surgical treatments have been described over the last 50 years to treat both acute and chronic instability. Arthroscopic techniques have emerged and have been constantly developed over the last 20 years aiming to reestablish joint stability through minimally invasive approaches.

Increase in the use of these arthroscopic techniques, along with the development and technological advances in the industry, have led to significant changes in the therapeutic field of this type of diseases.

This increase has led ankle joint anatomy to be understood from an arthroscopic perspective. Descriptions of ankle ligaments have usually a classic 2-dimensional anatomic approach and are usually brief in most classic anatomy books1,2.

Several studies have been conducted over the last 15 years to assess the arthroscopic approach to the treatment of chronic ankle instability; however, few published works provide a detailed anatomical description3. Therefore, a new anatomo-arthroscopic approach has been widely developed by internationally anatomists over the last decades4-5.

The aim of this article is to present the superficial and deep anatomy of the lateral ligament complex of the ankle, specifically from the arthroscopic perspective, relating it with some surgical procedures6-7.

The 2 joints that participate in ankle configuration are the tibiotalar (tibioastragalar) and the subtalar (talocalcaneal) joints8 (Figure 1).

The tibiotalar joint (TTJ) is the most important and connects the distal extremities of the tibia and the fibula to the talus bone (Figure 2A-B).

How to cite this article: Batista JP, Arrondo GM, Logioco LD, Casola L, Cangiano LV, Matías-Joannas G. Anatomo-arthroscopic approach of the lateral ligament complex of the ankle. J Foot Ankle. 2022;16(1):25-34.
The tibia and the fibula are firmly connected by strong ligaments forming a joint mortise or dome on which the trochlea or pulley of the talus is fitted. Therefore, this trochlear joint is formed by 3 bones: tibia, fibula, and talus, consisting of a joint with a triangular morphology and with a proximal base that accounts for 30% of ankle joint stability. This stability depends mainly on the shape of joint surfaces of the talus and the tibia (Figure 3A-B).

The subtalar joint (STJ) is formed by the inferior side of the talus and the superior side of the calcaneus. This joint is stabilized through a series of very strong ligamentous structures well adapted to bear load and forces exerted during gait. Traditionally, 2 joint compartments are described: one posterior or talocalcaneal compartments (trochoid), and other anterior or talocalcaneonavicular (enarthrosis).

The anatomy of the STJ is complex. In its inferior side, it presents 2 joint segments divided by an osseous canal that ends at the sinus tarsi. In the anterior region, the anterior and medial facets of the inferior side of the talus articulate with the anterior facet of the calcaneus, whereas, in the posterior region, the posterior facet of the talus articulates with the posterolateral facet of the calcaneus. Many ligamentous structures originate from the sinus tarsi and the tarsal canal. Harper categorized these ligamentous structures into 3 well-defined groups: superficial, intermediate, and deep layers(9).

The main ligament is the interosseous talocalcaneal ligament, a thick and strong band of 2 partially united fibers that connect the talus and the calcaneus. It is located medially in the tarsal canal and has the peculiarity of fusing with the medial root of the inferior extensor retinaculum (IER) at the level of the calcaneus in a V-shape configuration (Figure 4A-B).

The lateral interosseous talocalcaneal ligament, which is short and strong, connects from the lateral talus under the peroneal facet up to lateral calcaneus and runs parallel to the calcaneofibular ligament (CFL)(10,11).

The medial interosseous talocalcaneal ligament extends from the medial tubercle of the talus up to the sustentaculum tali at the medial surface of the calcaneus.

Another important ligament of the STJ is the anterior capsular ligament. This thick flat ligament was defined by some authors as a thickened segment of the anterior joint capsule of the posterior talocalcaneal facet.

Figure 1. Anatomical slice of the frontal plane of the ankle showing tibiotalar and subtalar joints. Figure 2. A) Arthroscopic image of the tibiotalar joint. B) Arthroscopic image showing the tibia (above), the talus (below) and the fibula laterally. Figure 3. A) Anatomical piece of the talus visualized from above (talar dome). B) Anatomical piece of the joint facet of the tibia (tibial plafond). Figure 4. A) Frontal anatomical slice showing the interosseous talocalcaneal ligament. B) Oblique anatomical slice showing the interosseous talocalcaneal ligament.
The TTJ presents a joint capsule that is superiorly inserted into the anterior side of the tibia at nearly 8 to 10 millimeters from the cartilaginous lining. It is worth highlighting that it slightly expands to fatty tissue attachments between the distal epiphysis of the extremities of the tibia and the fibula, it is prolonged up to the inferior tibiofibular joint (tibiofibular syndesmosis). Similarly, it is inserted into the neck of the talus at nearly 6 to 8 millimeters from the cartilaginous line (Figure 5).

The lateral joint capsule of the ankle is supported by the anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL), the posterior talofibular ligament (PTFL), and the CFL.

These structures, together with superior and inferior retinacula and the medial collateral ligament, are important static stabilizers of the ankle(12) (Figure 6).

The joint capsule is relaxed in ankle dorsiflexion and is flattened in ankle plantar flexion. Therefore, in anterior arthroscopic procedures of the ankle, surgeons will benefit from operating with the patient in the dorsiflexed position, since it will expand the surgical site, will move neurovascular structures away from potentially hazardous instruments such as shaver or other sharp elements, and will prevent possible iatrogenic talar dome injuries by hiding the joint surface under the tibiofibular mortise.

Anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL)

The ATFL is flat and quadrilateral, according to early descriptions made by Testut(13), and relatively thin, being the weakest lateral ligamentous structure. It is inserted in the anterior edge of the lateral malleolus of the fibula and courses towards the lateral side of the talus, being immediately inserted under a triangular area, whose identification is extremely important in procedures of anatomical reconstruction or capsular augmentation in chronic ankle instabilities(2,8,14) (Figure 7A-E).

This ligament has an approximate length from 15 to 20 mm, width from 6 to 10 mm, and thickness of 2 mm(15,16).

In thin individuals with no history of sprains, it is possible to identify the ATFL and the CFJ by visualization and palpation. Visualization and palpation of the ATFL are improved in plantar flexion and supination, whereas the CFJ is better palpated in ankle inversion (Figure BA-C).

The ATFL plays an important role in limited anterior translation of the talus over the tibia and in plantar flexion of the ankle (Figure 9).

The 2 traditional maneuvers to assess its integrity are the anterior drawer test, which assesses the degree of ATFL integrity through anterior translation of the knee, and the Tilt test, which assess the integrity of both ligaments, primarily the CFL, and the degree of restriction of ankle inversion.

Figure 5. Arthroscopic image showing insertion of the joint capsule distant 8-10 mm from the joint cartilage of the tibia. Figure 6. Panoramic image of anatomical dissection of the anterolateral ligament complex of the ankle. Figure 7. Anatomo-arthroscopic images of proximal and distal insertions of the anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL). A) Image of anatomical dissection with sites of proximal and distal insertions of the ATFL indicated with black circles. The red circle shows the reference triangle below which the distal footprint of the ATFL is located. B) Arthroscopic image from the anterolateral portal showing normal distal insertion of a proximally repaired ATFL. C) Arthroscopic image of normal structures of the distal insertion of the ATFL. D) Arthroscopic image of the distal footprint of the ATFL.
In standing position, the ATFL runs parallel to the plantar support surface, but in ankle plantar flexion of the ankle, its orientation changes, it becomes more tense, and becomes aligned perpendicularly with the support surface; therefore, this is the position in which the ATFL is more vulnerable and more prone to injuries (Figure 10A-C).

In the 1950s and in the 1980s, 2 early cadaveric dissection studies\(^{12,17}\) showed that the ATFL was the main primary restrictor of supination and anterior talar translation in all positions. Rasmussen\(^{18,19}\) described that this ligamentous structure played a crucial role in controlling plantar flexion and internal rotation of the talus.

Stormont et al.\(^{20}\) also determined that the ATFL was the major primary restrictor of internal rotation of TTJ. This finding, made 4 decades ago, was confirmed by contemporary authors such as Vega et al.\(^{21,22}\), who have shown the impact experienced by the medial axilla of the tibia, the medial segment of the talus and even, in certain occasions, the compromise of the anterior fascicle of the deltoid, turning a lateral instability into a rotational ankle instability with osseous or osteochondral sequelae in many cases (Figure 11A-C).

The ATFL presents 2 clearly defined bands, the superior and the inferior ones, which are separated by a small perforating peroneal artery that anastomoses with the lateral malleolar artery. This small branch is responsible for the bleeding and subsequent ecchymosis following an ankle sprain\(^{5}\) (Figure 12).

Some authors, such as Kelikian and Sarrafian\(^{23}\), described 3 bands of the ATFL. However, Golano et al.\(^{3-5}\) and Kitaoka\(^{24}\) were not able to systematically detect these 3 bands in their dissections. The superior band is the only one that can be arthroscopically visualized by directing the optical trocar towards the lateral gutter. This maneuver should be performed with the ankle flexed at 90° in this position superior band of the ATFL, the distal extremity of the fibula, and the lateral side of the talus can be clearly visualized, inspected, and palpated (Figure 13A-C).

It is extremely important not positioning the ankle in plantar flexion, because in this position, it is not able to visualize the fibula insertion of the ATFL\(^{25}\).

The tip of the peroneal malleolus is free of any insertions. The footprint of the ATFL is one centimeter above and in front of

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Figure 7. E) Site where a talar tunnel is carved in augmentations or reconstructions of the anterior talofibular ligament. Figure 8. Images of superficial anatomy of the ankle. A) Superficial anatomical image of the anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL). B) Superficial anatomical image of the ATFL in ankle inversion (the ligament is tensioned, thus improving its visualization and palpation). C) Superficial anatomical image of the ATFL visualized from a posterior view. Figure 9. Panoramic image of the anterior talofibular ligament (specimen with only 1 band). Figure 10. Anatomical images of the anterior talofibular ligament (ATFL) in relaxation, plantar flexion, and supination. A) Image of ankle at 90° with the ATFL relaxed.
the tip of the peroneal malleolus. This anatomic detail can be clearly seen during arthroscopic exploration of the ankle and should be considered when carving a tunnel in the fibula during ligament repair or reconstruction (Figure 14).

The proximal insertion of these bands are different. The superior band reaches the origin of the ATFJ (Bassett’s ligament), whereas the proximal insertion of the inferior band connects with fibers of the calcaneofibular and talocalcaneal ligaments through arciform fibers in its malleolar origin.

The superior band of the ATFJ is the first structure to be injured during an inversion trauma of the ankle, presenting an injury incidence of 80%, according bibliography (27,28).

In magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies with 22 patients with no history of ankle sprain, Delfaut et al.(29) found that the ATFJ was monofasciculated in 9% of the cases, bifasciculated in 55%, and striated in 36%.

Calcaneofibular ligament (CFL)

Unlike the ATFL, which acts only on the TTJ, the CFL is extracapsular and plays an important role in the stability of the TTJ and the STJ. Morphologically, it has a thick and cord-like shape. Moreover, it is inserted on the anterior side of the vortex of the lateral malleolus, immediately below, and very close to the insertion of the ATFL, to which it is usually joined by arciform fibers (13,30) (Figure 15A-B).

It measures approximately 4 to 8 mm in diameter and has a length of nearly 20mm and width of 4 to 5.5mm (19,31,32).

Its direction is oblique, towards posterior and distal, inserting on the lateral side of the calcaneus, 15mm or 20mm dorsally and posteriorly in relation to the lateral tubercle of this osseous structure, involving itself in its medial surface with the lateral talocalcaneal ligament (LTCL) (Figure 16). Immediately over its anterior edge and separated by a thin, and fatty tissue which sometimes goes unnoticed, we find the talocalcaneal ligament, separates the CFL from the STJ. The CFL is superficially crossed by the peroneal tendons and their sheaths, and only about 1cm of the ligament is uncovered. It is proximally fused with the fibers that form the floor of peroneal tendon retinaculum (Figure 17A).

During the plantar flexion of the ankle, the CFL is set horizontally; meanwhile, when flexed, it is set vertically, though, in both cases, it is tensed throughout during the arc of motion. This is a very strong ligament, and the only ankle movements during which it is relaxed is the ankle valgus position and the ankle eversion. In some situations of varus stress, the CFL is...
tensioned and may be injured event the ankle is not moving in flexion-extension (Figure 17B-C).

This ligament is the second structure to become injured during an ankle sprain, with an injury incidence of approximately 20%. When the CFL is injured, the ATFL is usually injured as well(10,26).

**Posterior talofibular ligament (PTFL)**

Testut describes the PTFL as a flat ligament that occupies the posterior region of the joint. However, anatomic dissections and arthroscopic visualizations represent it with a semi-cord-like shape and as the strongest and more resilient of the 3 ligaments(8,13) (Figure 18).

It has a trapezoid aspect and measures 30mm in length, 5mm in width, and 5-8mm in thickness(23,33).

This ligament is rarely injured, except in cases of peritalar ankle fracture or dislocation. Rasmussen and Tovborg-Jensen(18) state that the PTFL plays a minor role in ankle stability when the rest of the lateral structures are intact. Golanó described this ligament arthroscopically in numerous occasions, highlighting that this is a intracapsular but extrasynovial ligament; therefore, it can be easily visualized during posterior ankle arthroscopy(4,34,35) (Figure 19).

It inserts in the digital fossa, located in the medial, posterior part of the fibula and, from this point it runs medially, almost horizontally towards its insertion in the posterior area of talus. The footprint on this bone is quite large, which is why, descriptions of the surgical technique to resect the tail of the talus or an os trigonum show that is necessary to disinsert the fibers of this ligament that are inserted in the more distal area of the tail of the talus and to cut the retinaculum of the flexor hallucis muscle in order to resect the fragment in a technically appropriate manner(35,36).

Some fibers originated from the superior part of the PTFL, near its origin, lie proximally and medially, inserting themselves into the posterior edge of the tibia, and are fused with the fibers of the deep layer of the posterior tibio fibular ligament.

In cadaveric dissections, it has been noted that these fibers reach, in more than 90% of the cases, the posterior surface of the medial malleolus, creating a true labrum on the posterior margin of the tibia. This cluster of fibers has been given different names: capsular reinforcement bundle, ascending or tibial bundle of the PTFL; however, following the concepts of Golanó et al.(4,37) and Kitaoka(24), we prefer to use the term proposed by Paturet: posterior intermalleolar ligament (Figure 20).
Disinsertion of these distal fibers of the PTFL does not generate residual instability.

**Arciform fibers**

These fibers are an expansion of the regular, collagenous, and elastic dense connecting tissue, in the shape of a triangle or a semicircle, with an anteroinferior base that connects the inferior band of the ATFL with the LTCL and the CFL in a constant way. These structures have been clearly described by Kelikian and Sarrafian in 2011, and has been confirmed by Golanó et al., but attracted attention again in recent years due to the critical role they play in endoscopic repairs of the ATFL (Figure 21).

Arciform fibers are clearly identified in all cadaveric dissections and play a critical role within the lateral ligament complex of the ankle.

We assessed the macroscopic and microscopic morphology of these arciform fibers, and found that the histological structure of these fibers is similar to that of ligamentous structures (Figure 22A-B).

**Inferior extensor retinaculum (IER)**

The IER is a very strong aponeurotic structure located in the anterior area of the ankle and the tarsus and is continued with the crural fascia. It can have different morphological shapes, but it commonly has a “Y” or “X” shape. This powerful retinaculum is responsible for preventing that the anterior tibial, extensor hallucis longus, extensor digitorum, and peroneus tertius tendons are dislocated to the anterior side of the ankle. The lying ‘Y’ shape, the most common one, is formed, from medial to lateral, by oblique superomedial and inferomedial bands, and continues through a single branch, the frondiform ligament (Figure 23).

This lateral part of the IER stem from the sinus tarsi and is divided into 2 branches at the extensor digitorum tendon: the oblique superomedial band, which runs proximally and end by inserting itself in the anterior portion anterior of the tibial malleolus, and the oblique inferomedial bands, which end by inserting itself into the abductor hallucis muscle and into the scaphoid and medial cuneiform bones.

The superomedial and inferomedical bands are located over the anteromedial region of the ankle, whereas the frondiform ligament is in the anterolateral region of the ankle and is the portion of the IER that could be used in augmentation surgical procedures to treat chronic ankle instability. It is worth highlighting that this structure is not close enough, nor crosses the ATFL, which could enable for it to be used in augmentation procedures.
However, in 25% of the cases, some authors observed that oblique superolateral band varies considerably in shape and is responsible for the X-shape of the IER(32,38) (Figure 24).

When this band is present, it crosses the ATFL and inserts into the lateral surface of the peroneal malleolus. Only this band should be used to perform IER augmentation following ATFL ligament repair.

Some fibers of this oblique superolateral band are in continuity with the superior peroneal retinaculum and run over the submalleolar portion of peroneal tendons. The IER have been often used by many surgeons worldwide over several decades to increase the repair of ATFL (Brostrom-Gould), a technique that is considered the gold standard by most of these surgeons, due to the excellent clinical and biomechanical outcomes obtained in large series with long-term follow-ups(35,39).

Several authors have shown that advancing the IER and inserting it into the fibular periostium promotes a function similar to the role played by CFL, thus stabilizing the STJ(40,41).

As previously mentioned, the frondiform ligament crosses the STJ; sometimes, overtensioning of this structure during a surgical procedure of augmentation may lead to greater STJ stiffness and to plantar flexion deficit in these patients, which can be a problem, especially when dealing with athletes(38,42).

Despite this last assumption, long-term studies did not show degenerative changes in the STJ among patients which chronic instability who were treated with these so-called “anatomical” techniques of repair and augmentation.

**Conclusion**

The ankle joint has been widely investigated from the anatomical, biomechanical, and surgical perspectives, producing a vast series of experimental observations.

The introduction of arthroscopy as a therapeutic element, along with the development of several completely arthroscopic techniques of ankle joint repair, augmentation and/or reconstruction have obliged surgeons to understand arthroscopic anatomy, which is nothing but a visualization different from the anatomy we all have studied.

Understanding the superficial, deep, and arthroscopic anatomy of the ankle allows for performing arthroscopic procedures to treat chronic lateral instability of the ankle in a systematized, reproducible, and safe manner.
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