



Three-dimensional computed tomography modeling for kinematic analysis of double-strand lateral ulnar collateral ligament reconstruction

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Background: When treating posterolateral rotatory instability, the lateral ulnar collateral ligament (LUCL) is more commonly reconstructed than the other dynamic stabilizer structures. Although numerous surgical techniques have been described for LUCL reconstruction, studies have been limited to static analyses of single-strand reconstructions. The aim of this study was to dynamically analyze the kinematics of double-strand LUCL reconstructions with 3 different configurations of graft placement: horizontal, vertical, and triangular.

Methods: Five healthy elbow joints with no signs of pre-existing pathology were scanned by computed tomography, and the images were converted into 3-dimensional models. The humeral origin and ulnar insertions of the 2 ligament strands were registered in 3-matic software for the 3 graft placement configurations. A dynamic elbow joint was simulated at 1° increments throughout the motion arc. The ligament strand lengths and the difference between them were measured.

Results: The ligament lengths for each strand for the 3 graft configurations were as follows: horizontal, 31.0 ± 4.6 mm and 34.3 ± 5.0 mm; vertical, 32.5 ± 3.6 mm and 35.4 ± 4.2 mm; and triangular, 32.0 ± 4.0 mm and 33.7 ± 3.1 mm. The minimum length differences for the graft strands through the motion arc for the horizontal, vertical, and triangular graft configurations were 1.1, 0.0, and 1.0 mm, respectively.

Conclusions: Dynamic analyses using a 3-dimensional elbow model showed that none of the configurations for double-strand LUCL reconstruction were isometric. However, the vertical double-strand configuration was nearly isometric and may therefore serve as a coequal option.

Level of evidence: Basic Science Study; Computer Modeling

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Posterolateral rotatory instability (PLRI) is a type of chronic elbow instability.^{29,30-32,40} Many studies have described the lateral ulnar collateral ligament (LUCL) as the “principal lesion” that causes PLRI,^{14,17,20,21,29,30,33} and LUCL reconstruction remains the most common surgical procedure for treating PLRI when conservative treatment fails.^{20,28,33}

The principles of isometric and anatomic tunnel reconstruction to re-create a native ligament have been widely applied in the reconstruction of other ligaments,^{3,4,12,16,42} but as yet, there are no universally established isometric points for LUCL tunnel placement. Studies have reported that the native LUCL is not isometric^{5,23,27,35} and that reconstruction of the LUCL as isometrically as possible will ensure that equal force is transferred to the elbow joint.¹⁵

LUCL reconstruction techniques vary in the fixation technique used, the graft choice, the number of strands, and the bone tunnels created.^{17,19,20,21,28,30,31,36-38} Identifying the anatomic landmark is paramount for successful LUCL reconstruction. The humeral tunnel position for LUCL reconstruction has been widely studied, and its isometric point is more consistent and reproducible than that of the ulnar tunnel.^{2,28,41} The recommendation for humeral tunnel placement has been well described by Cohen and Hastings⁹: The placement should be at the base of the lateral epicondyle, where it flattens onto the lateral aspect of the capitellum. This would be consistent with some observations that have suggested that the elbow may have a rotational axis that passes through the center of the capitellum, although the existence of such a rotational axis remains debatable.^{10,20,22,27,33} Anatomic guidelines for the isometric point for ulnar tunnel placement have not been well defined, although the ulnar tunnel contributes more to graft orientation. Previous studies have described the supinator tubercle as a reference point; however, this cannot be identified reliably in every individual.^{1,2} A study has shown the supinator tubercle to be prominent in 50% of cadaveric specimens,² so a significant number of LUCL reconstructions may be nonanatomic at the ulnar insertion site, making it challenging for the surgeon to determine and reproduce the ulnar tunnel placement for anatomic reconstruction. This could lead to the inadvertent nonanatomic placement of tunnels.

Double-strand LUCL reconstructions have been described in several studies.^{2,17,28,30,36} The benefit of a double-strand reconstruction is that varus and posterolateral rotational instability of the elbow can be achieved by using 2 separate strands of graft and a larger footprint to increase the stability of the radial head.^{2,36} Isometric double-strand LUCL reconstructions have not been described widely,^{2,36} with most studies concentrating on single-strand reconstructions analyzed statically.^{17-19,28,30,31,36-38} Hence, there is a strong need to investigate the precise ulnar tunnel placement for double-strand LUCL reconstruction to achieve an isometric reconstruction. In this study, we compared 3 different graft configurations for double-strand LUCL

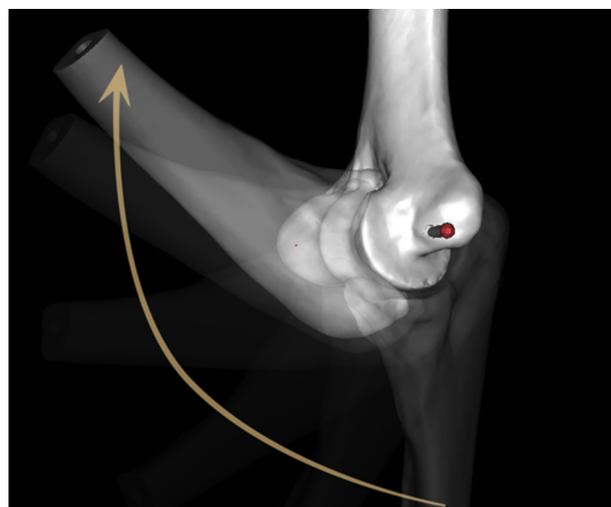


Figure 1 Simulated elbow movement (*arrow*) with the rotational axis selected as a reference point (●), from full extension (0°) to full flexion (135°) in 1° increments, with neutral forearm rotation.

reconstruction using 3-dimensional (3D) computed tomography (CT) modeling for each degree of the arc of elbow motion.

Materials and methods

Image acquisition and 3D model reconstruction

We retrospectively reviewed 5 elbow joints from healthy volunteers with no history of trauma to the upper extremity. These elbow joints, from the distal humerus to the proximal radius and ulna, underwent CT scanning with 0.5-mm axial cuts, which were stored in Digital Imaging and Communications in Medicine (DICOM) format. MIMICS software (Mimics Research, version 17.0; Materialise, Leuven, Belgium) was used to convert the scans into patient-specific 3D computer models. Bone segmentation was performed using a single-threshold method, as previously described.³⁴ The growing region method was used to separate the humeral, ulnar, and radial bone segments.

Rotational axis selection

By use of several distal humerus cross sections, the geometric center points of the spherical capitellum and the circular trochlear groove were defined by the centroid of a circle-fitted surface tracing method, based on a method used in a previous study.¹¹ The best-fit line connecting these center points in all the cross sections was defined as the rotational axis (Fig. 1).^{2,39} This axis was based on several studies that showed that the elbow’s center of rotation is located in the medial aspect of the trochlea in the distal humerus.^{7,8,13,18}

Footprint selection

The footprints were registered using the freeform patch function in 3-matic software (3-matic Research, version 9.0; Materialise).

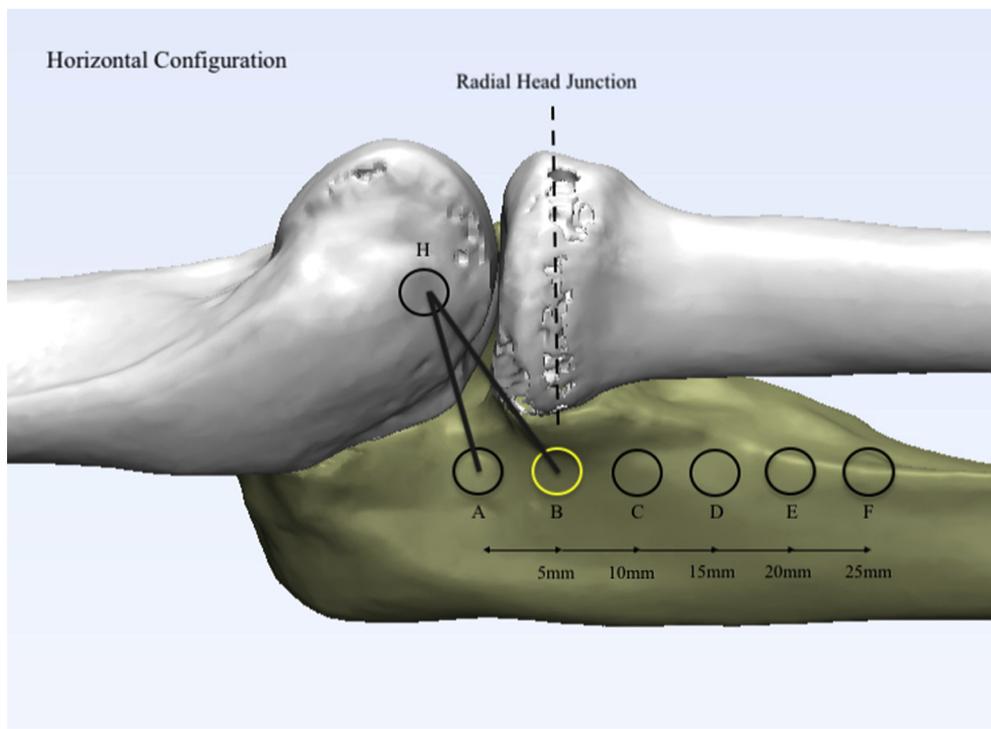


Figure 2 Horizontal subconfigurations. Humeral origin footprint (*H*) was registered at the center of the lateral aspect of the capitellum. The reference point (○) was located at the level of the radial head junction, which was also the second ulnar insertion (*B*). The first ulnar insertion was registered 5 mm proximal to the reference point (*A*). The subsequent ulnar insertions were located 10 mm (*C*), 15 mm (*D*), 20 mm (*E*), and 25 mm (*F*) distal to the reference point. There were 5 subconfigurations, registered as A-B, B-C, C-D, D-E, and E-F.

They were exported into a cloud of 3D vertices, which consisted of multiple points in each area. The LUCL reconstruction was double stranded. We applied 3 graft configurations with different ulnar insertions: horizontal, vertical, and triangular configurations. The selection of the humeral origin footprint was based on previous computer model studies, which located it at the center of the lateral aspect of the capitellum.^{2,24,26} The landmark for the ulnar insertion footprint was also chosen based on previous computer model studies, which located it at the supinator crest, at the level of the radial head junction.^{2,26} This acted as a reference point to register other ulnar insertion footprints (Fig. 2).¹⁸ Each of the 3 configurations had 5 subconfigurations.

In the horizontal configuration, the first ulnar insertion was registered 5 mm proximally to the reference point. The subsequent ulnar insertions were registered at 5, 10, 15, 20, and 25 mm distally from the first ulnar insertion. Five pairs of horizontal subconfigurations were made according to the order (Fig. 2). The first 5 ulnar insertions of the horizontal configuration served as references for the vertical configuration, with the pairs for ulnar insertions made at intervals of 5 mm dorsally (Fig. 3). The selection of the triangular configuration was based on a previous study.² The first ulnar insertion of the triangle configuration was the same as that for the horizontal configuration. The pairs for each ulnar insertion were made 5 mm dorsally and 5 mm proximally (Fig. 4).

Ligament length kinematics and analysis

The 3D cloud points and rotational axis were imported into MATLAB software (MATLAB and Statistics Toolbox, release

2013b; The MathWorks, Natick, MA, USA). Movement of the elbow was simulated by rotating the ulna about the humerus along the rotational axis from full extension (0°) to full flexion (135°), at the initial and final flexion positions, and for each 1° increment between these. The execution program represented each tunnel length by interconnecting the vertices' points derived from the 3D model in 1° increments of elbow motion. The result files were exported from MATLAB software to a master data file. The lengths of the ligaments from the humeral origin to the first ulnar insertion (HU1) and second ulnar insertion (HU2) were measured at each point throughout the entire elbow motion arc, and the difference between them (HU1 – HU2) was calculated. This difference was used to represent the amount of graft motion at each point in the elbow motion arc. The smallest standard deviation of the length difference in the entire motion arc was used to identify the ligament length that produced the configuration that was closest to isometric. For this configuration, the minimum, maximum, and mean ligament length differences through the range of motion were recorded.

Statistical analysis

The data were expressed as mean and standard deviation. HU1 and HU2 across each subconfiguration were analyzed with analysis of variance. The differences in the lengths of the 2 ligaments for every configuration were also analyzed with analysis of variance. The level of statistical significance was set at $P < .05$.

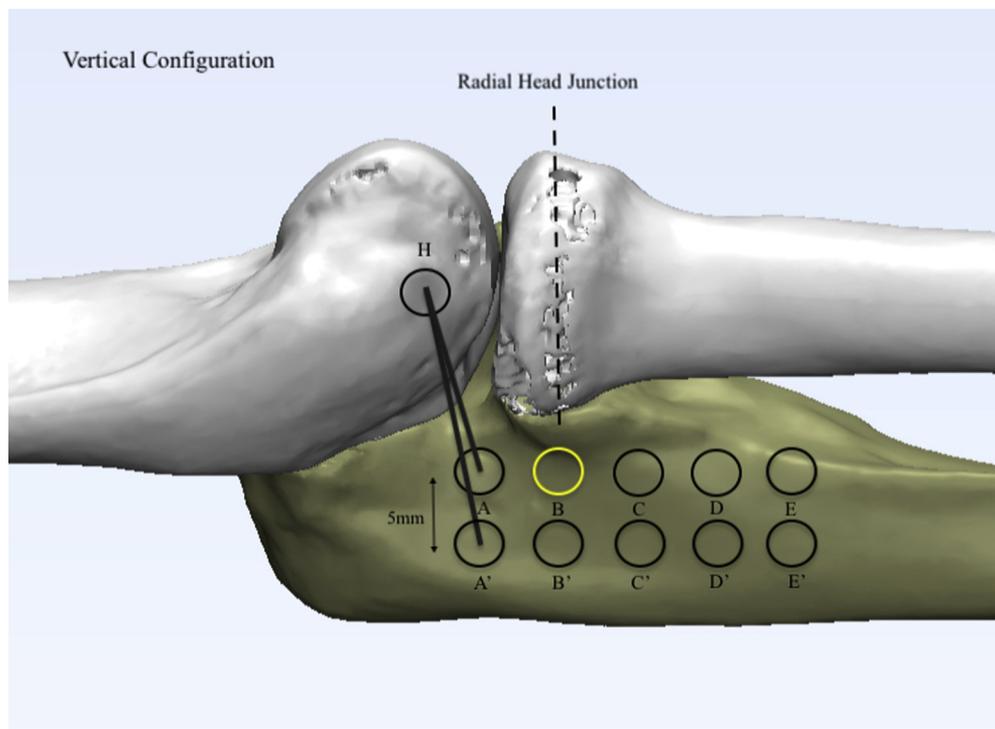


Figure 3 Vertical subconfigurations. Humeral origin footprint (H) was registered at the center of the lateral aspect of the capitellum. The level of radial head acted as reference point (\odot) for the following ulnar insertions registrations. The first 5 ulnar insertions of the horizontal configuration served as references for the vertical configuration, with the pairs for ulnar insertions made at intervals of 5 mm dorsally. There were 5 subconfigurations, registered as A-A', B-B', C-C', D-D', and E-E'.

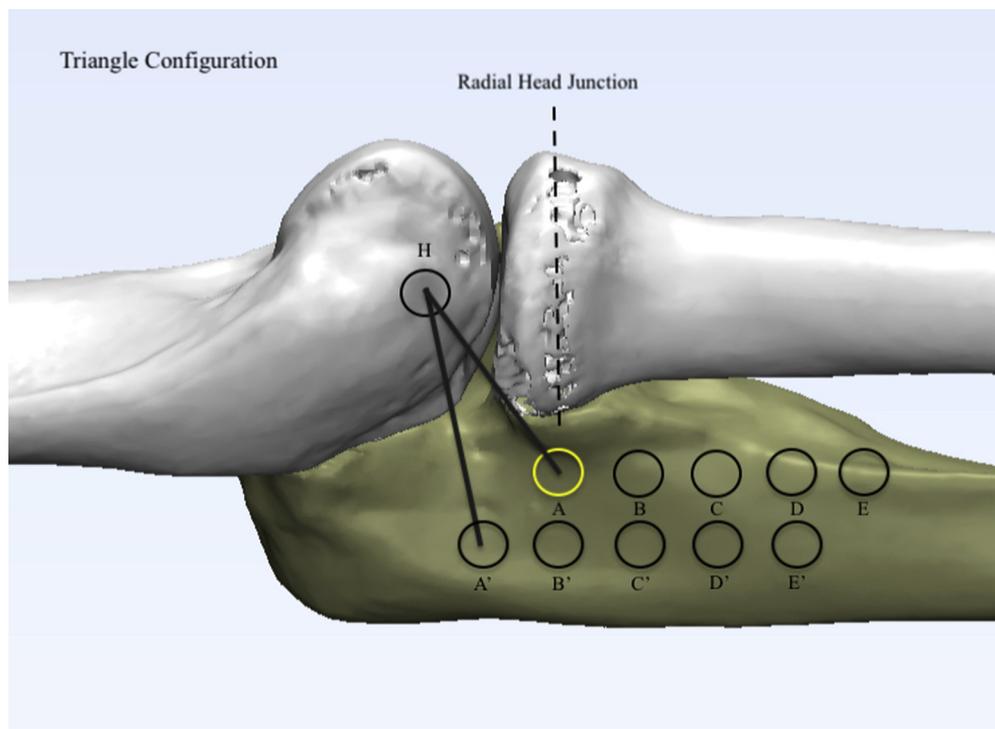


Figure 4 Triangular subconfigurations. Humeral origin footprint (H) was registered at the center of the lateral aspect of the capitellum. The level of radial head acted as reference point (\odot) for the following ulnar insertions registrations. The first ulnar insertion of the triangular configuration was similar to the horizontal subconfigurations. The pairs of ulnar insertions were made 5 mm dorsally and 5 mm proximally to each corresponding horizontal subconfiguration. There were 5 subconfigurations, registered as A-A', B-B', C-C', D-D', and E-E'.

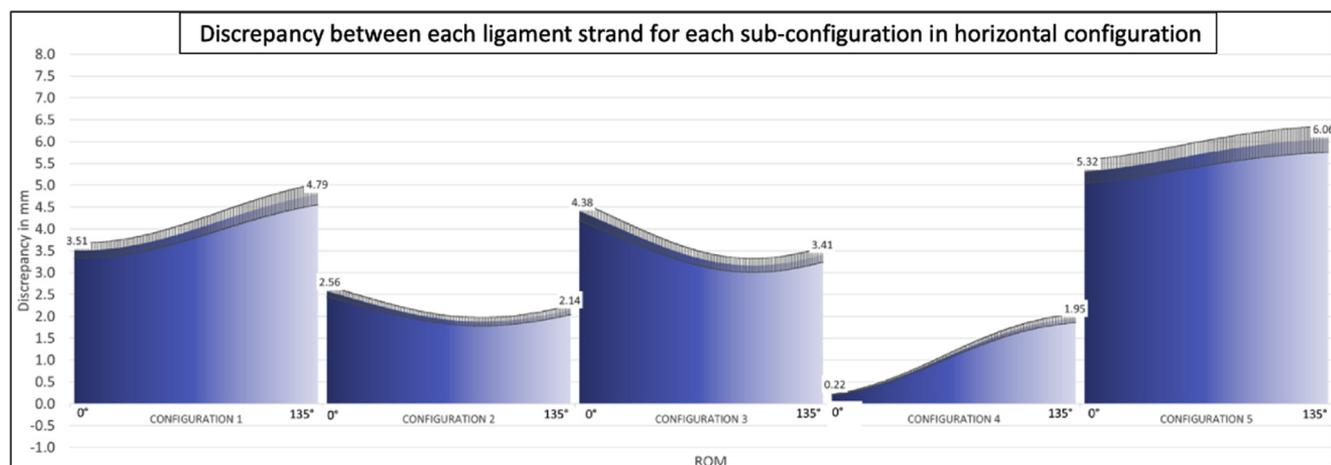


Figure 5 Of the subconfigurations of the horizontal graft placement configuration, subconfiguration 4 showed the smallest difference between the 2 ligament strands throughout the entire motion arc. *ROM*, range of motion.

Table I Maximum and minimum ligament lengths from humeral origin to first and second ulnar insertions

Configuration	Subconfiguration	Minimum HU1 length, mm	Maximum HU1 length, mm	Minimum HU2 length, mm	Maximum HU2 length, mm
Horizontal	1 (A-B)	25.9	28.2	29.8	33.0
	2 (B-C)	26.9	30.1	28.8	32.5
	3 (C-D)	27.2	30.4	30.6	33.8
	4 (D-E)	34.4	38.4	35.3	40.3
	5 (E-F)	34.8	39.5	40.4	45.5
Vertical	1 (A-A')	26.3	29.0	30.9	33.6
	2 (B-B')	29.8	32.5	30.4	33.6
	3 (C-C')	32.4	37.2	32.5	37.0
	4 (D-D')	34.1	37.9	37.6	41.1
	5 (E-E')	34.2	39.4	36.8	41.4
Triangular	1 (A-A')	27.0	29.9	29.6	32.1
	2 (B-B')	28.0	31.5	30.4	32.9
	3 (C-C')	29.5	32.7	33.2	36.4
	4 (D-D')	34.0	38.1	33.1	36.4
	5 (E-E')	35.7	40.5	37.3	41.0

HU1 length, ligament length from humeral origin to first ulnar insertion; *HU2 length*, ligament length from humeral origin to second ulnar insertion.

Results

All results were reported as mean and standard deviation with 0.1-mm measurements. We found no isometric point for any of the 5 subconfigurations of the 3 graft configurations. The ligament lengths for every configuration changed throughout the range of motion (Figs. 3–5), with the HU1 and HU2 lengths differing for each configuration (Tables I and II). For each degree of the motion arc, the ligament length changed in each configuration (Table III). The vertical configuration showed the smallest difference in ligament lengths, whereas the greatest difference was seen for the horizontal configuration. The minimum differences in ligament lengths were found in subconfiguration 4 for the horizontal configuration (Fig. 5), subconfiguration 3 for the vertical configuration (Fig. 6), and subconfiguration 4

for the triangular configuration (Fig. 7). The smallest overall difference was found with subconfiguration 3 of the vertical configuration, at 0.01 ± 0.09 mm of distance, which rounded to 0.0 ± 0.1 mm (Table III).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the kinematics of a double-strand LUCL reconstruction with 3 different configurations of graft placement. We were unable to find a graft configuration for double-strand LUCL reconstruction that resulted in absolute isometricity. There were slight changes in both ligament strands throughout the arc of elbow motion, with loosening observed in the middle of the flexion arc and tightening in full flexion; these findings

Table II Ligament length from humeral origin to first and second ulnar insertions

Configuration	Subconfiguration	HU1 ligament length, mm	<i>P</i> value for HU1 ligament length	HU2 ligament length, mm	<i>P</i> value for HU2 ligament length
Horizontal	1 (A-B)	26.7 ± 0.7	.825	30.7 ± 0.9	.818
	2 (B-C)	28.0 ± 1.0		30.1 ± 1.1	
	3 (C-D)	28.2 ± 0.9		31.7 ± 1.0	
	4 (D-E)	35.7 ± 1.1		36.8 ± 1.4	
	5 (E-F)	36.2 ± 1.3		41.9 ± 1.5	
Vertical	1 (A-A')	27.2 ± 0.8		32.5 ± 0.8	
	2 (B-B')	30.7 ± 0.8		31.3 ± 0.9	
	3 (C-C')	33.8 ± 1.3		33.7 ± 1.2	
	4 (D-D')	35.3 ± 1.0		38.3 ± 1.0	
	5 (E-E')	35.7 ± 1.5		41.1 ± 1.3	
Triangular	1 (A-A')	27.9 ± 0.8		30.5 ± 0.8	
	2 (B-B')	29.0 ± 1.0		31.3 ± 0.8	
	3 (C-C')	30.7 ± 1.0		34.2 ± 0.9	
	4 (D-D')	35.3 ± 1.2		34.2 ± 1.0	
	5 (E-E')	37.1 ± 1.4		38.4 ± 1.0	

HU1 length, ligament length from humeral origin to first ulnar insertion; *HU2 length*, ligament length from humeral origin to second ulnar insertion.

Table III Length discrepancy of both ligament strands

Configuration	Subconfiguration	Minimum discrepancy, mm	Maximum discrepancy, mm	Mean discrepancy, mm	<i>P</i> value
Horizontal	1 (A-B)	3.5	4.8	4.1 ± 0.4	.482
	2 (B-C)	1.9	2.6	2.1 ± 0.2	
	3 (C-D)	3.2	4.4	3.5 ± 0.4	
	4 (D-E)	0.2	2.0	1.1 ± 0.6	
	5 (E-F)	5.3	6.1	5.7 ± 0.2	
Vertical	1 (A-A')	4.0	5.2	4.6 ± 0.4	
	2 (B-B')	0.0	1.2	0.7 ± 0.4	
	3 (C-C')	0.0	0.2	0.0 ± 0.1	
	4 (D-D')	3.2	3.7	3.4 ± 0.2	
	5 (E-E')	2.0	3.4	2.5 ± 0.5	
Triangular	1 (A-A')	2.1	3.1	2.6 ± 0.3	
	2 (B-B')	1.3	3.6	2.3 ± 0.8	
	3 (C-C')	2.7	3.9	3.6 ± 0.4	
	4 (D-D')	0.4	2.0	1.0 ± 0.6	
	5 (E-E')	0.5	2.2	1.3 ± 0.5	

were consistent with those from a previous study. This result suggests that a tendon graft would increase tension and strain by increasing the angles of elbow flexion, although tightening only started in the middle of the motion arc. We speculate that some graft creep would take place to allow full elbow flexion. The native LUCL is not isometric, so our findings were in accordance with the physiological condition. PLRI occurs in extension, so it is understandable why the tunnel length is longer at full extension, because this will tighten the graft to stabilize the elbow joint. There is a small amount of laxity in the middle of the flexion arc.

In this study, the lengths of the 2 ligament strands showed less fluctuation in the vertical configuration than in the other 2 configurations, indicating that the results of this technique were closest to isometric. The trends in changes

in ligament length were minimal throughout the range of motion, indicating that there was minimal movement of the grafts through the range of motion of the elbow joint. The isometric placement of the graft during reconstruction has become a standard treatment, based on the premise of minimizing graft loads and elongation forces and providing early postoperative elbow range of motion.²⁵ Isometric grafting prevents the windshield-wiper effect, which can contribute to tunnel widening, graft wear, loss of fixation, residual instability, and decreased range of motion.⁶

Among the subconfigurations of the vertical graft placement configuration, the third showed the minimum length difference between the ligament strands. In this subconfiguration, the first tunnel was located at the supinator crest, 5 mm distal to the equator of the radial head. The next tunnel

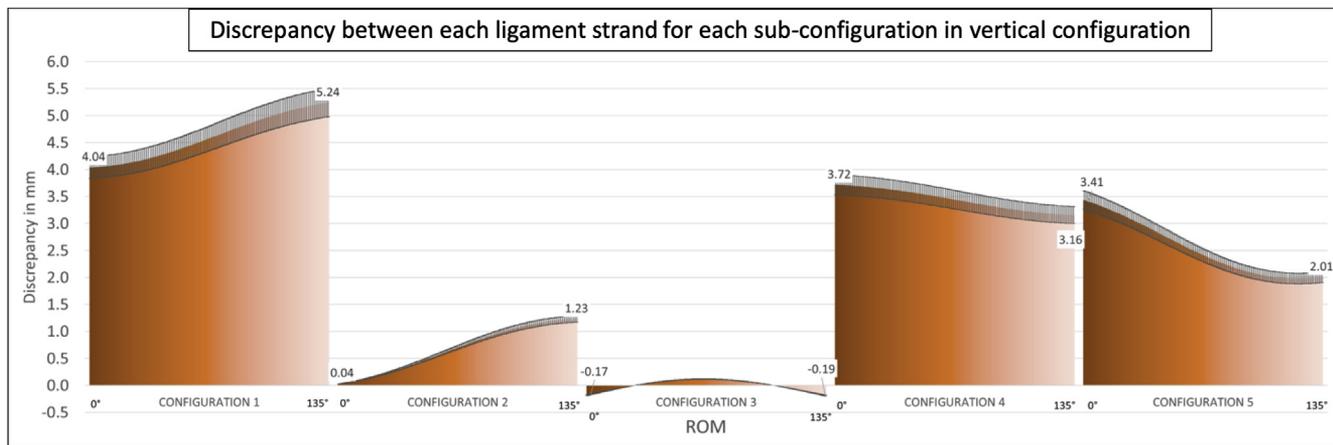


Figure 6 Of the subconfigurations of the vertical graft placement configuration, subconfiguration 3 showed the smallest difference between the 2 ligament strands throughout the entire motion arc. *ROM*, range of motion.

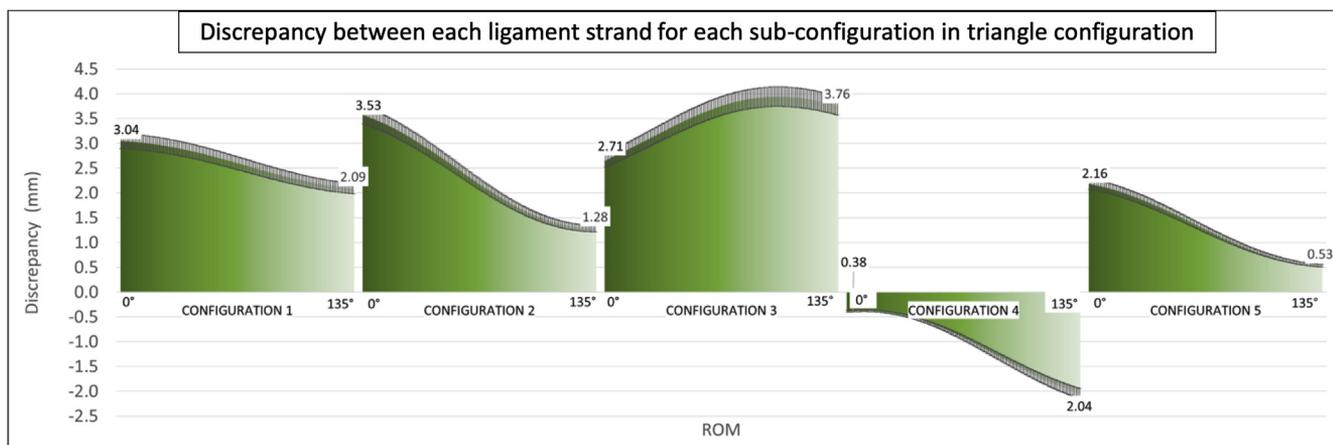


Figure 7 Of the subconfigurations of the triangular graft placement configuration, subconfiguration 4 showed the smallest difference between the 2 ligament strands throughout the entire motion arc. *ROM*, range of motion.

was located 5 mm dorsally. Our numerical result was rounded to the nearest tenth from 0.01 mm. We will use the hundredths value for the purpose of discussion. Although this configuration did not achieve a strictly isometric point, it could nevertheless be considered isometric, given that the mean difference in ligament lengths was only 0.01 mm throughout the whole range of motion. From a clinical point of view, a 0.01-mm change in movement would be almost impossible to distinguish. The results of our modeling found no isometric trends for any graft placement configuration. This is consistent with the findings of several studies that showed that the native LUCL is not isometric.^{5,23,27,35} A biomechanical study of cadavers by Goren et al¹⁵ was unable to find an isometric point for a single-strand LUCL reconstruction, with graft elongation of about 1 mm. Our study showed similar results but with graft elongation of only 0.01 mm. A 0.01-mm difference is not mathematically isometric but can be considered clinically isometric. We are of the opinion that the superior precision of our result was because of our use of computer modeling. The results of

biomechanical studies of cadavers can be affected by ligament laxity, which is not present in computer model studies. Goren et al also found that not all specimens had the same optimal position and that the most nearly isometric point was likely to be patient specific. This means that there will always be individual morphologic characteristics for each specimen, which explains the variability of the data. However, we did not explore these properties in our study.

Our findings showed that the vertical configuration produced results that were closer to isometric than those of the other configurations. In our opinion, the vertical configuration is easier to reproduce than the isosceles triangle configuration described in the literature, given that it does not need any unusual angle measurements.^{2,36} Using the vertical configuration would minimize the geometric error in the isosceles triangle configuration and would provide a broader graft to buttress the lateral radial head compared with the horizontal configuration. Our study found no LUCL reconstruction that was isometric, with at least a 0.01-mm difference in ligament lengths. This finding

suggests that no matter what configuration is used for LUCL reconstruction, it will not provide isometric graft properties. However, the point with the minimal length difference should be the fixation point for which to aim.

This study was not without limitations. First, the number of patient-specific elbow models used was limited. However, our study described the specific configuration for accurate and precise tunnel locations, resulting in a nearly isometric LUCL reconstruction. A strength of our study was lack of random bias owing to computer-aided design, which produced highly consistent and reproducible results. Second, the study used a fixed linear axis of rotation; however, it is universally agreed that the elbow joint has no fixed center of rotation. Nevertheless, because of minimal variation in the elbow flexion axis, the ulnohumeral joint can be assumed to be a uniaxial articulation with a fixed center of rotation. Our rationale for using this setting was that it created a uniform and consistent experiment setup. Third, the design of the study limited the involvement of muscle activity. The forearm extensors are known to play an important role in the active stabilization of the elbow joint and might, therefore, influence the results obtained. The origins and insertions of ligaments were determined based only on general anatomic information; individual variances in ligamentous and skeletal anatomy were not taken into account. In addition, this was a simulation study, so it cannot confirm whether the results would make a difference clinically.

Conclusion

The results of this study showed that dynamic analyses of the elbow joint provide a good understanding for LUCL reconstruction. Double-strand LUCL reconstruction using the vertical configuration can provide nearly isometric reconstruction. This will minimize graft motion and wear, as well as tunnel widening, and will prevent loss of motion and residual instability of the elbow joint.

Disclaimer

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