Screws—Form and function
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Learning outcomes

• At the end of this lecture you will be able to:
  • describe the screw as a mechanical device
  • discuss its physical attributes
  • discuss functions which screws perform

At the end of this lecture you will be able to:
• describe the screw as a mechanical device
• discuss its physical attributes and functions
• discuss functions which screws perform
What is a screw?
What is a screw?

Each of these devices – ship’s propeller, aircraft propeller, bone screws, corkscrew, and bolt are all screws, because...
What is a screw?

- A device
  - for converting rotational forces
  - into linear motion

...they each convert rotation into linear motion.
With the exception of some corkscrews, a generic screw has (1) a solid central core ...
A screw has a thread about which is wrapped (2) a spiral surface.
In the surgical context, most screws have a screw-head, the function of which is discussed later.
Most surgical screws are made of either stainless steel or titanium.
A screw has a particular design

Thread design may vary according to the physical characteristics of the bone in which the screw is intended to gain purchase. The two main thread types of surgical screws are for cortical bone and for cancellous bone. Each screw type is available in fully threaded and partially threaded format.
A screw can be cannulated

Screws are also available with central cannulae. Such a screw can be introduced over a threaded-tip guide wire. The guide wire is inserted preliminarily, partly as temporary fracture stabilization, and partly so that the final orientation can be checked radiologically, prior to screw insertion. These screws are self-tapping. There is no need to use the tap.
Here is an example of the thread of a cortex screw. A surgical screw is a device manufactured to high specifications, and is to be used with great care and precision. In order to select the correct instruments and technique for insertion of any screw, the surgeon needs to be familiar with its dimensions. The diameter of the core determines the minimal hole size for the screw to be accommodated in the bone and determines the drill used to create the pilot hole for the screw. In other words the drill to be used will be the same (approximately the same) diameter as the core of the screw.
The outside diameter (or thread diameter) determines the minimal size of any hole through which the screw will glide without its threads’ purchasing in the bone. This is sometimes known as the “nominal” diameter of the screw, as the screws are often categorised by this dimension. For example, the standard large fragment cortex screw has an outside diameter of 4.5 mm, and is called a 4.5 cortex screw.
The effective thread depth is the maximal depth of the spiral that is theoretically available for gaining purchase in the bone and thereby driving the screw forward when it is rotated. It is half the difference between the core diameter and the outside thread diameter. The thread depth of the cancellous bone screw is deeper than the thread depth of the cortical bone screw.
An appropriate length of screw needs to be chosen. The nominal length of the screw is from the top of the head to the screw tip. As most of the AO screws do sink into the plate, these screws are measured in total length. This is the case for all cortical, cancellous and locking head screws.
Screw parameters—length

An appropriate length of screw needs to be chosen. Too short—it will not gain full purchase in the bone. Too long—it may cause problems by irritating the soft tissues, or protruding subcutaneously.

The techniques of measuring the correct screw length are discussed later on.
The pitch of the screw is the length travelled by the screw with each 360° turn of the spiral.
The shorter that distance, the “finer” the pitch; the longer that distance, the “coarser” the pitch. Cortical bone screws have a fine pitch, cancellous bone screws have a coarse pitch.
Screw parameters—pitch

The finer the pitch, the more turns of the screw thread engage in cortical thickness.

The finer the pitch, the more turns the surgeon will have to make to insert the screw and the more turns of the spiral thread engage in a given depth of cortex. The more threads engaged in the cortex, the greater the pull-out resistance.
Screw parameters—head

- Two basic functions
  - to attach a rotational screwdriver

The screw head has two basic functions.
One is to permit the attachment of a screwdriver in order to produce the rotation necessary to insert the screw.
This is achieved by producing a shaped recess; this is usually star-shaped, or hexagonal: some very small screws, used in metacarpal and phalangeal surgery, have cross-shaped recesses.
Screw parameters—head

- Two basic functions:
  - to attach a rotational screwdriver
  - to arrest forward motion

The second one is to arrest forward motion.
Screw parameters—threaded head

• Third function:
  • to lock the screw head into its plate hole
  • to create an angular stable construct

There is a third function of some screw heads. The development of the threaded, or locking, head has allowed screws to lock into threaded plate holes and by creating an angularly stable construct. This is explained in greater detail at a later stage.
Screw tipsy—cortical bone screws

Screw tips are of three major types.
The standard, round-tipped screw needs pre-drilling of a pilot hole and then tapping (the creation of a thread in the bone by the use of a separate thread-cutting tool - a tap).
The self-tapping screw needs pre-drilling of a pilot hole, but creates its own thread in the cortical bone by virtue of cutting flutes at the tip.
The self-drilling screw requires no preparation of the bone before insertion. It is also self-tapping.
Screw tips—cancellous screws

The tips of cancellous screws are designed as a tapering spiral. These tips create their own threads in cancellous bone, as the tapered spiral advances, it pushes the spongy cancellous bone aside to thread its way into the bone.
In small bones, such as the scaphoid, self-compressing, double pitch screws can be used.
These are usually cannulated.
Screws—special: double pitch

As the fine pitch of the thread on the head engages the bone, it travels less far on turning than the coarse-pitched tip and so compression is applied across the fracture plane.
Screws—what are they used for?

For what are screws used in fracture surgery?
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression

Screws are often inserted across a fracture plane to produce interfragmentary compression, as in this spiral metacarpal fracture.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression

Note how, because of the spiral nature of the fracture and the need to insert the screws perpendicular to the fracture plane, they vary in direction.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression
  - Use of washers

Partially threaded cancellous bone screws, inserted across a fracture to produce interfragmentary compression, are used in joint areas, as in this tibia head fracture. Washers spread the load applied by the head on the underlying cortex. Washers are used to prevent the screw head from breaking through the thin cortex.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression
  - Lag screw principle

For a screw that crosses a fracture plane to produce interfragmentary compression, the thread must purchase in only the far cortex and there must be a gliding hole in the near cortex. This is known as the “lag screw” principle.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression
  - Lag screw principle

Special partially threaded cortical, or shaft-screws are available for this purpose. The drilling procedure is the same, except in softer bone, no gliding hole needs to be drilled.
Screws—what are they used for?

If the screw that crosses the fracture plane purchases in both cortices, it cannot produce interfragmentary compression. This would be the case if the screw hole has been drilled with 3.2 mm through both cortices. No gliding hole has been drilled.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression
- To attach implants to bone by compressing them onto the bone surface

Screws are also commonly used to attach implants, such as plates, to bones. As the plate hole is larger than the outside diameter of the conventional cortex screw and the screw has good purchase in the underlying bone, as it is tightened it compresses the plate to the bony surface.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression
- To attach implants to bone by compressing them onto the bone surface
- To attach implants to bone producing angular stability

Screws are also commonly used to attach implants, such as plates, to bones. By using a threaded head screw in its matching locking plate, an angularly stable construct results – the concept of angular stability will be explained more fully later in the course.

This is especially useful in metaphyseal fractures. When such screws are used in the shafts of healthy long bones, monocortical screws will often suffice.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To produce interfragmentary compression
- To attach implants to bone by compressing them onto the bone surface
- To attach implants to bone producing angular stability
- To hold two bones in correct relationship—position screws

Screws are sometimes used to hold a relationship between two bones: these are called “position” screws. Their threads purchase in both bones and the screws do not compress the bones together.

In this example, the fibula is fractured high up at its neck and the interosseous ligaments are torn: the fibula has been pulled into its normal anatomical relationship to the tibia, and held in position with two screws, each purchasing in two fibular and two tibial cortices.

In this instance, where the screws are being used to stabilize the tibio-fibular syndesmosis, they are sometimes referred to as “syndesmosis” screws.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To lock an intramedullary nail to the cortices

Screws passed through the cortices and through holes in IM nails increase stability by resisting deformation in rotation and shortening. These are referred to as interlocking screws.
Screws—what are they used for?

- To lock an intramedullary nail to the cortices
- To block movement of a main fragment around an IM nail—Poller screws

Screws passed through the cortices and directly alongside IM nails increase stability by blocking angulation of a main fragment in relation to the nail. Such screws are called “Poller” screws.
Screws—what size?

Screws come in various size ranges, depending on the size of the bone being fixed. There are mini-, small- and large-fragment sets.
Screws—what size?

Screw size charts are readily available, indicating associated drill and tap sizes.
Lag screw technique

1. Reduction

The steps of the lag screw technique in cortical bone should be followed in a logical order. Normally, after holding the fracture fragments in a position of anatomical reduction (1)...

Lag screw technique

1. Reduction
2. Gliding hole

... the near cortex is drilled to produce a gliding hole (2). The chosen drill for the gliding hole is that of the outside (or nominal) diameter of the selected screw. For example, if a conventional 4.5 mm cortex screw is selected, then the gliding hole drill will be of 4.5 mm diameter.

NB. In this series of illustrations the pointed reduction forceps is omitted, for the sake of clarity.
Lag screw technique

1. Reduction
2. Gliding hole
3. Thread hole

The drill sleeve for the core diameter drill bit is then inserted into the gliding hole, and through it the pilot hole is drilled in the far cortex (for a conventional cortex screw this is 3.2 mm diameter) (3).
Lag screw technique

1. Reduction
2. Gliding hole
3. Thread hole
4. Countersink

The near cortex is then countersunk...
Lag screw technique

1. Reduction
2. Gliding hole
3. Thread hole
4. Countersink

...to spread the load of the head of the screw on the underlying cortex. Failure to countersink can result in very high stresses at the screw-head/bone interface, causing microfractures, leading to screw loosening.
The depth of the screw track is then measured, taking care to engage the hook of the depth gauge against the obtuse edge of the exit hole, not the acute angled edge (5). It is important to follow this order of steps of technique to make sure that the correct length of the screw is measured. If measuring takes place before countersinking then the length of the screw will be too long.
Lag screw technique

1. Reduction
2. Gliding hole
3. Thread hole
4. Countersink
5. Measure
6. Tap

The far cortex is then tapped by hand, using the drill sleeve in the gliding hole (6) – this step is omitted when using self-tapping screws.
The selected screw is then carefully inserted, tightening it to produce interfragmentary compression.
Optional
Insert questions to check learning
The core of a screw defines:

1. Outer diameter of a screw
2. Proper screw size
3. Drill bit size for the pilot hole

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Locking head screws:

1. Provide dynamic compression
2. Provide angular stability
3. Can be applied as lag screws

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1. Provide dynamic compression
2. Provide angular stability ✓
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Optional
Insert questions to check learning
When to countersink?

1. Before measuring screw length
2. After measuring screw length
3. After tapping

Optional
Insert questions to check learning
When to countersink?

1. Before measuring screw length
2. After measuring screw length
3. After tapping

Optional
Insert questions to check learning
**Additional Material**

This material is additional to the core knowledge, but may be incorporated in any presentation where it is deemed to be required.
An example of the value of angular stability is the use of locking screws in the head fragment of proximal humeral fractures. The locking of the screw heads in the upper-threaded holes of the plate creates an implant composite with a fixed angle between the plate and the locking screws. This greatly reduces the tendency for varus angulation of the head. Locking screw fixation is better in osteoporotic bone.
The DLS comprises a threaded hollow sleeve with a separate threaded head attached to a core which is fixed inside the sleeve at the tip.
Screws—special: DLS (Dynamic Locking Screw)

The fit of the core in the sleeve is such that micromotion can occur, under load, between the head and the sleeve.
Screws—special: DLS (Dynamic Locking Screw)

It is alleged that the capacity for micromotion allows small fracture gaps to close by movement along the longitudinal axis of the bone. It is claimed that this encourages circumferential callus. Evidence for its efficacy is awaited (mid-2012).
Screws—special: ASLS (Angular Stable Locking System)

To lock an intramedullary nail to the cortices.

A recent design update for interlocking screws is the Angular Stable Locking System. This is discussed in more detail in the IMN lecture.
You should now be able to:
- Describe the screw as a mechanical device
- Discuss its physical attributes and functions
- Discuss functions which screws perform