Osteosynthesis involving a joint
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Learning outcomes

At the end of this lecture you will:

• Understand the pathophysiology of articular cartilage
• Describe the need for anatomical reduction and rigid fixation in articular fractures
• Discuss “staged surgery”

At the end of this lecture you will be able to:

• Outline the pathophysiology of articular cartilage
• Describe the need for anatomical reduction and rigid fixation
• Discuss “staged surgery”
Articular cartilage and chondrocytes stay alive because they receive oxygen and nutrients by diffusion from joint fluids. This only works if there is both regular movement and physiological loading forces.
To work properly, the articular cartilage must be very smooth. This minimizes friction. When a fracture occurs near to the cartilage, it can change this environment. Any changes in the axial alignment or step-offs in the articular surface may lead to rapid degenerative change in the joint, eg, posttraumatic arthrosis and arthritis.

Arthrosis: Degenerative cartilage
Arthritis: Inflammation of the joint
Over 100 years ago, Lambotte observed that only “perfect anatomical reduction and stable fixation” by screws combined with early motion allows to obtain a good functional outcome in articular fractures.

Lambotte described that a transfixation screw (between fibula and tibia) in an unreduced fibula must result in a severe osteoarthritis. The drawing and the x-rays show a clinical example of such a situation from the early days of AO.
Historical introduction

1913, A Lambotte, Belgium:
• Perfect anatomical reduction and stable fixation
• Early motion
• Transfixation screw in un reduced fibula

20 years later:
• Osteoarthritis
• Joint fusion

The same case 20 years later with severe posttraumatic osteoarthritis resulting in spontaneous fusion (ankylosis).
Classification of articular fractures:
Each bone segment, proximal and distal, is divided in three types of fractures:
• A – Extra articular fracture
• B – Partial articular fracture
• C – Complete articular fracture
On the slide a distal femur (no. 31 in the AO Classification) is shown as an example.
Each type is divided in three subgroups.
Classifying the fracture helps preoperative planning.

A fractures have a better prognosis than B and C fractures. Type 1 fractures have a better prognosis than type 3 fractures.
Reduction

- Anatomical reduction of joint surface:
  - Mandatory
  - Requires good visualization (open incision):
    - Entire joint
    - Critical structures

Articular fractures must be reduced anatomically, which requires good visualization of the entire joint, including critical structures like eg, the ulnar nerve.
In displaced articular fractures anatomical reduction and reconstruction with rigid fixation is the treatment of choice. Early rehabilitation is important.
Complications of surgery can be a result of:
• Poor reduction
• Inadequate fixation
• Wrong implant
• Poor soft-tissue care
• Wrong timing

Most complications can be avoided with careful planning.
Preoperative planning

- Assessment of fracture and soft tissue:
  - X-ray imaging, including CT
- Classify fracture
- Reduce fracture on paper
- Discuss:
  - Procedure
  - Approach/incision
  - Patient positioning
  - Position of implants
  - Choice of instruments
  - Need for bone graft

Preoperative planning involves
- Correct assessment of fracture and soft-tissue parts
  - X-ray imaging, including CT: Traction views and CT scans (3D) are most instructive also in view of the planning of approaches.
- Classification of the fracture
- Reduction and drawing on paper
- Discussion of the:
  - Procedure step-by-step
  - Approach
  - Position of patient
  - Choice of implant(s) and the position of the implant(s)
  - Choice of instruments
  - Need for bone graft
The timing of surgery is always very crucial and important, certainly when the soft tissue is vulnerable. This is often the case when the layer of subcutaneous fat is thin and hardly no muscle structure is present. Tension of the skin results in ischemia and later on in necrosis.

In case of doubt temporary stabilization of the fracture is chosen until the skin and soft tissue recovered. ORIF is done at a later stage.
The timing of surgery depends on:

• The history of the injury. What kind of energy was involved (high or low)? How long was the interval since the accident?
• Swelling, skin tension, blisters, hematoma...
• Open/closed injury:
  • Contamination
  • Neurovascular status
• Compartment pressure

Open and contaminated fractures, bad neurovascular status, and high compartment pressure are an indication for immediate surgery; temporary or definitive.

The longer the interval since the accident, the quicker the operation needs to be done, certainly in open and contaminated fractures.

Swelling, skin tension, and bad soft-tissue conditions are indications to delay definitive surgery and proceed to staged surgery (which will be explained later).
There are three types of surgery: primary definitive surgery, secondary surgery, and staged surgery. Each one has advantages and drawbacks. Most important in all cases are the soft tissues. This will define to which surgery the surgeon will proceed.
Primary definitive surgery

- Unproblematic soft tissues
- Simple, open articular fracture (1° and 2°)
- Fractures with vascular injury

Prerequisites
- Complete preoperative planning
- Access to OR
- Full equipment available
- Experienced team of surgeons and nurses
A young man sustained an open proximal tibia fracture (III C) after a motorbike accident.
An angiography in the operating room was done to detect the status of the popliteal artery.
The injury was approached through a medial incision. The popliteal vessels were repaired in a first step.

Motorbike accident—Case 1

• Surgery
  1. Medial approach to repair popliteal vessel
In a second step the fracture was reduced and fixed with a 3.5 mm angled blade plate.
Both interventions, the vascular repair and the osteosynthesis, were done by the same team. One and the same approach was used.
Because of the long duration of the ischemia the compartments were released prophylactically through several incisions.
After 5 days, necrosis of the skin had to be removed at level of the tibial tuberosity.

Motorbike accident—Case 1

- Second look:
  - Debridement of skin necrosis over tibial tuberosity
After 5 days, necrosis of the skin had to be removed at level of the tibial tuberosity.

Motorbike accident—Case 1

- Second look
  - Debridement of skin necrosis over tibial tuberosity
  - Cover of defect with gastrocnemius flap
A control angiogram was done to prove the patency of the popliteal artery.
Motorbike accident—Case 1

- 13 weeks postoperative
- No complications

13 weeks later, there were no complications…
13 weeks later, there were no complications…

Motorbike accident—Case 1

- 13 weeks postoperative
  - No complications
  - Good function
This is the result after 1 year, showing a well healed bone with congruent articular surfaces.
Staged surgery—or minimally invasive preliminary fixation—is the preferred technique for complex articular fractures today. An example is a joint bridging external fixator.

The advantages are:
• Protection of soft tissue
• Reduction aid for definitive surgery
• Patient remains “mobile”
• For “less experienced surgeon” at night
This case from Dr Christoph Sommer (Switzerland) shows an anterior impaction of the distal tibia after a skiing accident.
A CT scan shows that the case is an absolute indication for surgery.

**Skiing accident—Case 2**

- Anterior impaction of distal tibia (43-C fracture)
- Absolute indication for surgery
  - Better evidenced by CT scan
In the first stage an external fixation has been installed to fix the fracture temporarily allowing the soft tissue to recover before definitive surgery.
14 days later definitive surgery took place. A standard approach and distraction at the fracture site created space…
Skiing accident—Case 2

- Staged surgery (2)
  - 14 days later
  - Reconstruction of anterior impaction
  - Standard approach under distraction
  - Elevation of articular fragment with two K-wires

...allowing to elevate the articular fragment with two K-wires.
A K-wire cage is build as temporary fixation.
A new pilon plate is used as anterior buttress.
8 months later, the patient has good functionality of the ankle and no complications.
In most cases 3.5 mm implants are used. Screws and plates are more adequate than IM-nails.
Postoperative care

If the patient is compliant, the postoperative care consists of:

- Continuous passive motion (CPM) for 5–6 days
- No external splint
- Immediate toe-touch (15 kg) weight bearing
- 6–8 weeks 30–40 kg weight bearing
The results after ORIF in articular fractures are in general good provided there is:

- Anatomical reduction and rigid fixation
- An experienced surgeon doing the surgery
- Early rehabilitation

Results:
- 70–80% is good to excellent
- 10–15% is moderate
- 5% is bad
Results

- Remember physiology of cartilage:
  - Damaged cartilage never "heals" completely
  - Its repair "depends" on early joint motion
Conclusion

- Displaced articular fractures are absolute indications for surgery
  - Staged surgery is advisable in complex fractures
- Correct timing and planning is crucial
- Experienced surgical team is important
  - New locking plates may have advantages, but a good surgeon is more important
- Early mobilization reduces cartilage damage
  - Injured cartilage never heals completely

Conclusion

- Displaced articular fractures are an absolute indication for surgery provided there is anatomical reconstruction and rigid fixation.
  - Staged surgery is advisable in complex fractures.
- Correct timing and planning are crucial:
  - Good imaging and classification are important
  - Choice of approach(es)
  - Choice of reduction
  - Choice of implants and instruments
  - Choice of bone grafts or substitutes
- New locking plates may have advantages but a good surgeon is more important

Injured cartilage never heals completely, but early mobilization is mandatory to reduce cartilage damage.
Optional

Insert questions to check learning.
Displaced articular fractures are an indication for surgery providing...

1. Anatomical reconstruction and rigid fixation
2. Anatomical reconstruction and relative fixation
3. Reconstruction of length and axis and rigid fixation

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Displaced articular fractures are an indication for surgery providing...

1. Anatomical reconstruction and rigid fixation

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Optional
Insert questions to check learning.
Advantages of staged surgery, eg, external fixator are…

1. Recovery of soft tissue
2. “Early” mobilization of patient
3. Use as reduction aid

Optional
Insert questions to check learning.
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1. Recovery of soft tissue
2. "Early" mobilization of patient
3. Use as reduction aid

...external fixator are...

Advantages of staged surgery, eg,
Optional
Insert questions to check learning.
Cartilage

1. Can heal completely

2. Heals only partially

3. Does not heal

Optional
Insert questions to check learning.
You should now be able to:

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