Journal of Chemical Health Risks

www.jchr.org

JCHR (2025) 15(1), 961-969 | ISSN:2251-6727

Evaluation of High-Grade Acromioclavicular Dislocations Fixed by Coracoid Sling Procedure

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(Received: 21 December 2024. Revised: 20 January 2025 Accepted: 15 February 2025)

KEYWORDS

Acromioclavicular Dislocation, Coracoid Sling Procedure, Rockwood Classification, Shoulder Stability, Ethibond Sutures, Mid-Term Outcomes, Shoulder Rehabilitation, Visual Analog Scale, Disability of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand Score

ABSTRACT:

Background

Acromioclavicular (AC) joint injuries are common shoulder injuries, particularly among athletes and individuals engaged in high-risk activities. The Rockwood classification system categorizes these injuries into different grades based on ligamentous involvement and displacement. High-grade AC dislocations (Grade III and above) require surgical intervention to restore joint stability and prevent long-term complications such as chronic pain and functional impairment. The coracoid sling procedure is an emerging technique for AC joint reconstruction that utilizes Ethibond sutures to restore ligamentous stability while minimizing complications associated with hardware-based fixation techniques.

Objective

This study aims to evaluate the clinical and functional outcomes of patients with high-grade AC dislocations (Rockwood Grade III and above) treated using the coracoid sling procedure with Ethibond sutures. The primary outcome measures include radiological reduction, postoperative stability, and functional improvement assessed using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS) and Disability of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand (DASH) score.

Methods

This prospective study was conducted at the Department of Orthopaedics, tertiary centre of eastern region, India, over a period of six months. A total of 20 patients with high-grade AC dislocations (Grade III and above) were included based on strict inclusion criteria. All patients underwent preoperative radiographic assessment, including AP and Zanca views, followed by a CT scan for accurate typing of the injury. The surgical procedure involved placing patients in a beach-chair position under an interscalene block, followed by coracoid sling reconstruction using double-stranded Ethibond sutures. Postoperatively, patients were immobilized in an arm sling and underwent a structured rehabilitation program. Clinical and radiological assessments were performed at 15-day

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intervals for three months, with functional scoring recorded at the final follow-up.

Results

The mean age of the study population was 36.4 years, with a male predominance (85%). The mean time from injury to surgery was 5.7 days. Postoperative radiographs confirmed satisfactory reduction of the AC joint in all patients. The mean VAS score improved significantly from 6.8 preoperatively to 1.2 at the final follow-up ($p < 0.001$), while the DASH score improved from 65.3 to 12.7 ($p < 0.001$). No cases of implant-related complications, coracoid fractures, or infections were reported. One patient experienced mild loss of reduction but retained functional stability.

Conclusion

The coracoid sling procedure using Ethibond sutures provides a reliable and effective method for the surgical management of high-grade AC dislocations. The technique offers stable fixation, excellent functional recovery, and a low complication rate, making it a viable alternative to conventional hardware-based fixation methods. Further studies with larger sample sizes and long-term follow-up are recommended to validate these findings.

Introduction

Acromioclavicular (AC) joint dislocations are among the most frequently encountered injuries in orthopedic practice, particularly affecting young, active individuals and athletes involved in contact sports or high-impact activities **[1]**. The AC joint plays a crucial role in maintaining shoulder stability by connecting the clavicle to the scapula, allowing controlled scapulothoracic motion. Injuries to this joint can lead to significant pain, functional impairment, and long-term disability if not managed appropriately **[2]**. The Rockwood classification is widely used to categorize AC joint dislocations based on the degree of ligamentous disruption and displacement, with high-grade dislocations (Grade III and above) typically requiring surgical intervention to restore joint stability and prevent chronic complications **[3]**.

Traditional surgical techniques for AC joint reconstruction have relied on hardware-based fixation methods, such as hook plates, screws, and Tight Rope systems. While these techniques provide initial joint stability, they are often associated with implant-related complications, coracoid fractures, metalwork migration, and the need for subsequent hardware removal, necessitating alternative approaches **[4]**. In recent years, biological and suture-based reconstruction techniques have gained popularity due to their ability to restore native ligamentous anatomy while reducing implant-related morbidity. Among these, the coracoid sling procedure has emerged as a promising technique for high-grade AC dislocations, utilizing Ethibond sutures to create a dynamic sling around the coracoid process, thereby replicating the function of the coracoclavicular ligaments **[5]**.

The coracoid sling procedure offers multiple advantages over hardware-based fixation methods. Unlike hook plates, which require removal after a period of healing and often lead to subacromial impingement, suture-based techniques are non-rigid, allowing controlled micromotion that mimics natural AC joint dynamics **[6]**. Additionally, they reduce the risk of coracoid fractures, which are a known complication of screw-based fixation. Several studies have demonstrated that Ethibond sutures provide adequate strength for maintaining AC joint reduction, and their use has been associated with high patient satisfaction, early mobilization, and excellent functional recovery **[7]**.

Despite these advantages, the clinical outcomes and long-term efficacy of the coracoid sling procedure in high-grade AC dislocations remain a subject of ongoing research. Limited studies have explored the functional and radiological success of this technique, particularly in resource-limited settings where cost-effective and biologically favorable solutions are needed **[8]**. This study aims to evaluate the clinical and functional outcomes of patients with high-grade AC dislocations treated using the coracoid sling procedure with Ethibond sutures. The primary objectives include

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assessing radiological reduction, postoperative stability, and functional recovery using validated scoring systems such as the Visual Analog Scale (VAS) and the Disability of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand (DASH) score **[9]**.

Furthermore, this study is one of the first prospective evaluations of the coracoid sling procedure conducted in a tertiary care center in Bihar, India. Given the high burden of trauma cases presenting at Indira Gandhi Institute of Medical Sciences, Patna, it is crucial to assess the applicability and feasibility of this technique in real-world clinical practice. The findings of this study will contribute to the growing body of evidence supporting suture-based AC joint reconstruction techniques and may provide insights into refining current surgical protocols for managing high-grade AC dislocations **[10]**.

Methodology (Unstructured and STROBE-Compliant)

This prospective observational study was conducted in the Department of Orthopaedics at tertiary centre of eastern region India, over a period of six months. The study aimed to evaluate the functional and radiological outcomes of high-grade acromioclavicular (AC) dislocations (Rockwood Grade III and above) treated using the coracoid sling procedure with Ethibond sutures. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Patients aged 18–60 years with Rockwood Grade III, IV, or V AC dislocation, confirmed radiologically, were included in the study. Those presenting within two weeks of injury and meeting the criteria for surgical intervention were eligible. Exclusion criteria included patients with pre-existing AC joint arthritis, chronic AC dislocations beyond two weeks, associated clavicular fractures, neurovascular injuries, or severe medical comorbidities preventing surgery.

Preoperative evaluation included a detailed clinical and radiological assessment. Standard anteroposterior (AP) and Zanca views of the shoulder were obtained for classification, with CT scans performed in cases requiring further clarification of displacement or coracoid morphology. Pain severity was assessed using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), and functional impairment was evaluated using the Disability of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand (DASH) score.

All procedures were performed under general anesthesia with an interscalene block, with the patient positioned in a beach-chair position. A 5-6 cm incision was made along the superior border of the clavicle, extending towards the coracoid process. The deltopectoral interval was dissected to expose the coracoid, ensuring preservation of neurovascular structures. A double-stranded Ethibond suture was passed beneath the coracoid process using a suture passer, looped around the lateral clavicle, and securely tied to restore AC joint stability. Fluoroscopic guidance confirmed adequate reduction before wound closure.

Postoperative radiographs were taken, and patients were immobilized in an arm sling for four weeks. A standardized rehabilitation protocol was followed, beginning with passive shoulder movements in the first four weeks, followed by active-assisted range of motion exercises. Strengthening exercises were introduced at six weeks, with gradual return to full activity by three months. Patients were assessed at 15-day intervals for three months, with a final evaluation at six months postoperatively.

Outcome measures included radiological success in maintaining AC joint reduction, functional improvement assessed via DASH scores, and pain relief evaluated using VAS scores. Secondary outcomes included implant failure, loss of reduction, coracoid fractures, infection, or wound-related complications. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software (version 22.0), with continuous variables analyzed using the paired t-test and categorical variables using the chi-square test. A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

A total of 20 patients with high-grade acromioclavicular (AC) dislocations (Rockwood Grade III and above) were included in this study. The mean age of the participants was 36.4 years, with a male predominance (85%). The dominant arm was affected in 70% of cases, while the non-dominant arm was involved in 30% of cases. The most common mechanism of injury was a fall on an outstretched hand (40%), followed by direct impact to the shoulder (30%), sports-related trauma

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(20%), and motor vehicle accidents (10%). The majority of patients presented for surgery within 3-7 days of injury (50%), while 30% underwent surgery within 3 days, and 20% had delayed surgery beyond 7 days. The mean operative time for the coracoid sling procedure using Ethibond sutures was 75.6 minutes, with an average blood loss of 120 ± 30 ml. Only one patient (5%) required additional fixation due to inadequate stability intraoperatively. Postoperative radiographic assessment confirmed satisfactory AC joint reduction in 90% of patients, while mild loss of reduction was noted in 10%, with no cases of significant displacement. Functional outcomes were assessed using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS) for pain relief and the Disability of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand (DASH) score for functional recovery. The mean preoperative VAS score of 6.8 decreased to 1.2 at six months, while the DASH score showed significant improvement from 65.3 to 12.7 at final follow-up. Complications were minimal, with no cases of coracoid fractures or deep infections. Only one patient (5%) experienced implant failure, and two patients (10%) developed a superficial wound infection, both of which resolved with conservative management. In terms of return to activity, 75% of patients resumed full work and sports, while 20% had some restrictions, and 5% reported persistent functional limitations. Patient satisfaction was high, with 80% of patients rating their outcome as "highly satisfied", and the overall success rate of the surgery was excellent in 70% of cases, with only one patient (5%) reporting a fair outcome.

Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of patients, showing no significant differences in age, gender, or affected limb distribution.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Patients

Parameter	Value
Mean Age (years)	36.4
Male (%)	85% (17)
Female (%)	15% (3)
Dominant Arm Injured (%)	70% (14)
Non-Dominant Arm Injured (%)	30% (6)

Table 2 below presents the mechanism of injury, highlighting that a fall on an outstretched hand was the most frequent cause.

Table 2: Mechanism of Injury

Mechanism	Frequency (%)
Fall on Outstretched Hand	40% (8)
Direct Impact to Shoulder	30% (6)
Sports Injury	20% (4)
Motor Vehicle Accident	10% (2)

Table 3 below presents the distribution of Rockwood classification among patients, indicating that Grade III was the most common.

Table 3: Rockwood Classification of AC Dislocation

Grade	Frequency (%)
Grade III	50% (10)
Grade IV	30% (6)
Grade V	20% (4)

Table 4 below presents the time from injury to surgery, showing that most surgeries were performed within 3-7 days.

Table 4: Time from Injury to Surgery

Time Interval	Frequency (%)
< 3 Days	30% (6)
3-7 Days	50% (10)
> 7 Days	20% (4)

Table 5 below presents the operative parameters, indicating a mean surgical duration of 75.6 minutes with minimal need for additional fixation.

Table 5: Operative Parameters

Parameter	Value
Mean Operative Time (min)	75.6

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Blood Loss (ml)	120 ± 30
Need for Additional Fixation (%)	5% (1)

Table 6 below presents the postoperative radiological assessment, confirming satisfactory reduction in most patients.

Table 6: Postoperative Radiological Assessment

Parameter	Value
Satisfactory Reduction (%)	90% (18)
Mild Loss of Reduction (%)	10% (2)
Significant Loss of Reduction (%)	0% (0)

Table 7 below presents the Visual Analog Scale (VAS) scores, showing significant pain relief postoperatively.

Table 7: Functional Outcomes (VAS Score)

Time Point	Mean VAS Score
Preoperative	6.8
1 Month	3.5
3 Months	2.1
6 Months	1.2

Table 8 below presents the Disability of the Arm, Shoulder, and Hand (DASH) scores, indicating substantial functional improvement.

Table 8: Functional Outcomes (DASH Score)

Time Point	Mean DASH Score
Preoperative	65.3
1 Month	40.7
3 Months	25.6
6 Months	12.7

Table 9 below presents complication rates, showing minimal implant failure and infection risks.

Table 9: Complication Rates

Complication	Frequency (%)
Coracoid Fracture	0% (0)
Implant Failure	5% (1)
Superficial Infection	10% (2)
Deep Infection	0% (0)
Reoperation Required	5% (1)

Table 10 below presents the return to activity status, indicating that most patients resumed full work and sports.

Table 10: Return to Activity

Activity Level	Frequency (%)
Full Work & Sports	75% (15)
Restricted Activity	20% (4)
Persistent Functional Limitation	5% (1)

Table 11 below presents patient satisfaction levels, showing a high satisfaction rate.

Table 11: Patient Satisfaction

Satisfaction Level	Frequency (%)
Highly Satisfied	80% (16)
Satisfied	15% (3)
Neutral	5% (1)
Dissatisfied	0% (0)

Table 12 below presents the overall success rate of surgery, demonstrating excellent surgical outcomes.

Table 12: Overall, Success Rate of Surgery

Outcome	Frequency (%)
Excellent	70% (14)
Good	25% (5)

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Fair	5% (1)
Poor	0% (0)

Discussion

Acromioclavicular (AC) joint dislocations are among the most commonly encountered shoulder injuries, particularly in young, active individuals engaged in high-impact sports or occupations requiring overhead activities **[11]**. High-grade AC dislocations (Rockwood Grade III and above) typically require surgical intervention to restore joint stability and prevent long-term complications such as chronic pain, weakness, and secondary degenerative arthritis **[12]**. Traditional surgical techniques, including hook plate fixation and coracoclavicular reconstruction with screws, have shown efficacy but are frequently associated with hardware-related complications, implant migration, and the need for secondary procedures for implant removal **[13]**. This study evaluates the coracoid sling procedure using Ethibond sutures as an alternative fixation technique, providing a biomechanically stable yet minimally invasive approach for treating high-grade AC dislocations.

Radiological and Clinical Outcomes

The primary aim of this study was to assess the ability of the coracoid sling procedure to maintain AC joint reduction, as well as its impact on functional recovery and pain relief. Postoperative radiographs confirmed satisfactory AC joint reduction in 90% of cases, with only 10% of patients exhibiting mild loss of reduction, and no cases of complete displacement or failure of fixation **[14]**. This aligns with previous studies that have demonstrated suture-based techniques effectively restore anatomical alignment while minimizing implant-related morbidity.

Pain relief was significant postoperatively, with the mean VAS score improving from 6.8 preoperatively to 1.2 at six months, indicating effective stabilization and early pain resolution. Functional outcomes, measured by the DASH score, also showed substantial improvement, from 65.3 preoperatively to 12.7 at final follow-up, reinforcing the benefits of a biomechanically sound and minimally invasive fixation technique **[15]**.

Comparison with Conventional Fixation Techniques

Traditional surgical approaches for AC joint stabilization, such as hook plates, TightRope fixation, and coracoclavicular screw fixation, have demonstrated good clinical results but are often associated with hardware-related complications, subacromial impingement, and the need for implant removal. Studies on hook plate fixation have reported high rates of plate irritation, requiring subsequent removal in up to 80% of cases, along with an increased risk of acromial osteolysis and subacromial bursitis **[16]**.

In contrast, suture-based techniques, such as the coracoid sling procedure used in this study, offer biological fixation that mimics the function of the native coracoclavicular ligaments. By utilizing a double-stranded Ethibond suture, this method allows controlled micromotion at the AC joint, reducing the risk of stress shielding and implant failure **[17]**. The results of this study support the efficacy of suture-based fixation, demonstrating early mobilization, pain relief, and high patient satisfaction, with no cases of coracoid fractures, implant migration, or deep infections **[18]**.

Complications and Safety Profile

The overall complication rate in this study was low, with no cases of coracoid fractures or deep infections, which are commonly associated with hardware-based fixation techniques. The implant failure rate was minimal (5%), and two patients (10%) developed a superficial infection, both of which resolved with conservative management **[19]**. The absence of major complications highlights the safety and reliability of the coracoid sling technique, reinforcing its viability as a primary fixation method for high-grade AC dislocations **[20]**.

Previous studies have reported coracoid fractures in up to 10% of cases when drilling-based techniques (such as Tight Rope or coracoclavicular screw fixation) were used, emphasizing the importance of preserving coracoid integrity. The suture-based approach used in this study circumvents this risk by avoiding coracoid drilling, thereby reducing mechanical stress at the coracoid base **[21]**.

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Return to Function and Patient Satisfaction

The ability to return to pre-injury levels of activity is a crucial measure of surgical success. In this study, 75% of patients were able to return to full work and sports, with 20% reporting some activity restrictions, and only 5% experiencing persistent functional limitations. This compares favorably with hook plate fixation, where prolonged immobilization and secondary plate removal often delay return to full activity **[22]**.

Patient satisfaction was notably high, with 80% of patients rating their outcome as "highly satisfied", and 70% achieving an "excellent" overall surgical success rate. The ability to restore normal shoulder biomechanics while preserving coracoid integrity makes this technique an attractive alternative to hardware-based fixation methods, particularly in resource-limited settings where access to advanced implants may be restricted **[23]**.

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The findings from this study strongly support the adoption of suture-based techniques for high-grade AC dislocation repair, particularly in patients where implant removal or secondary surgeries may not be desirable. The coracoid sling procedure using Ethibond sutures provides a stable, cost-effective, and biologically favorable fixation, reducing the risk of implant-related complications while ensuring early mobilization and functional recovery **[24]**. However, this study has certain limitations, including a relatively small sample size (n=20) and a follow-up period limited to six months. Longer-term studies are needed to evaluate the durability of AC joint reduction, the incidence of late-stage AC joint arthritis, and the comparative effectiveness of suture-based techniques against newer fixation methods such as arthroscopic-assisted AC joint reconstruction **[25]**.

Future research should focus on:

- Comparing coracoid sling fixation with hook plates and TightRope techniques in randomized controlled trials.
- Evaluating long-term outcomes, including recurrence rates and residual AC joint instability.
- Assessing cost-effectiveness, patient-reported quality-of-life measures, and return-to-sports timelines.

Summary of Key Findings

- The coracoid sling procedure using Ethibond sutures provided reliable AC joint stabilization, with 90% of cases achieving satisfactory radiological reduction.
- Pain relief was significant, with VAS scores improving from 6.8 preoperatively to 1.2 at six months.
- Functional outcomes demonstrated substantial improvement, with DASH scores improving from 65.3 to 12.7 at final follow-up.
- Complications were minimal, with no coracoid fractures, deep infections, or implant migration.
- 75% of patients returned to full work and sports, with 80% reporting high satisfaction levels.
- This technique presents a cost-effective, biomechanically favorable alternative to conventional hardware-based fixation methods.

This study underscores the effectiveness and safety of suture-based AC joint stabilization, advocating for its wider adoption in orthopedic practice, particularly in centers seeking reliable yet minimally invasive solutions for high-grade AC dislocations.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the coracoid sling procedure using Ethibond sutures is a safe, effective, and biomechanically stable technique for managing high-grade acromioclavicular (AC) dislocations (Rockwood Grade III and above). The procedure provided consistent radiological reduction (90%), significant pain relief (VAS score improved from 6.8 to 1.2), and substantial functional recovery (DASH score improved from 65.3 to 12.7) over six months of follow-up.

The absence of coracoid fractures, deep infections, or major complications highlights the safety profile of this technique. Compared to conventional hardware-based fixation methods, the suture-based coracoid sling technique offers a minimally invasive, cost-effective

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alternative, reducing the need for secondary surgeries and avoiding implant-related complications such as hardware migration and stress fractures.

Given its high success rate (70% excellent outcomes, 80% patient satisfaction), reliable joint stability, and early return to function (75% of patients resumed full work and sports), this technique should be considered a primary surgical option for high-grade AC dislocations, particularly in resource-limited settings where implant availability may be a challenge.

Future studies with larger sample sizes and long-term follow-up are needed to further validate these findings, assess long-term joint stability, and compare the coracoid sling technique with newer fixation modalities such as arthroscopic-assisted reconstructions.

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