A pilot study of the eccentric decline squat in the management of painful chronic patellar tendinopathy

C R Purdam, P Johnsson, H Alfredson, R Lorentzon, J L Cook, K M Khan

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Objective: This non-randomised pilot study investigated the effect of eccentric quadriceps training on 17 patients (22 tendons) with painful chronic patellar tendinopathy. Methods: Two different eccentric exercise regimens were used by subjects with a long duration of pain with activity (more than six months). (a) Nine consecutive patients (10 tendons; eight men, one woman; mean age 22 years) performed eccentric exercise with the ankle joint in a standard (foot flat) position. (b) Eight patients (12 tendons; five men, three women; mean age 28 years) performed eccentric training standing on a 25° decline board, designed to increase load on the knee extensor mechanism. The eccentric training was performed twice daily, with three sets of 15 repetitions, for 12 weeks. Primary outcome measures were (a) 100 mm visual analogue scale (VAS), where the subject recorded the amount of pain during activity, and (b) return to previous activity. Follow up was at 12 weeks, with a further limited follow up at 15 months. Results: Good clinical results were obtained in the group who trained on the decline board, with six patients (nine tendons) returning to sport and showing a significantly reduced amount of pain over the 12 week period. Mean VAS scores fell from 74.2 to 28.5 (p = 0.004). At 15 months, four patients (five tendons) reported satisfactory results (mean VAS 26.2). In the standard squat group the results were poor, with only one athlete returning to previous activity. Mean VAS scores in this group were 79.0 at baseline and 72.3 at 12 weeks (p = 0.144). Conclusion: In a small group of patients with patellar tendinopathy, eccentric squats on a decline board produced encouraging results in terms of pain reduction and return to function in the short term. Eccentric exercise using standard single leg squats in a similar sized group appeared to be a less effective form of rehabilitation in reducing pain and returning subjects to previous levels of activity.

Patellar tendinopathy is often a resistant and recurrent condition that primarily affects athletes in jumping sports. Treatment is initially conservative, and eccentric exercise is currently accepted as an important part of appropriate conservative therapy.1 The eccentric exercise commonly recommended for the patellar tendon is the squat.2 However, when a subject performs a squat, several mechanisms may unload the knee extensors and potentially reduce the eccentric load through the patellar tendon. Trunk flexion, side to side load sparing, and calf tension may all reduce the load placed on the knee.3,4 Passive and active calf tension have the potential to reduce demand on the knee extensors in the squat by limiting forward angulation of the tibia approaching the limit of ankle dorsiflexion. Purdam et al5 have suggested that this effect can be minimised, and load on the patellar tendon maximised, by performing a squat on a decline. As there has been no published research on the standard squat and the 25° decline squat in the treatment of patellar tendinopathy, we investigated the effect of these techniques in the treatment of this condition. The aim of this pilot study was to identify differences in pain reduction and recovery of function, using an eccentric single leg squat programme, on a flat surface and on a decline, in patients with patellar tendinopathy.

Materials and Methods

Subjects

Subjects referred to a university sports medicine clinic with the diagnosis of patellar tendinopathy were recruited to the study. All were examined by one orthopaedic surgeon (HA). The inclusion criteria were:

- pain in the proximal patellar tendon with increased load
- tenderness to palpation
- imaging changes at the proximal attachment of the tendon to the patella (ultrasonography or magnetic resonance imaging)
- having rested for more than three months without effect on the tendon pain

All patients had been treated with non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs. One subject had had hydrocortisone injected as part of conservative treatment. Ethics approval was obtained from the University of Umeå, Sweden and all subjects provided informed consent.

Intervention

Subjects in this pilot study were not randomised because of the later development and inclusion of the decline exercise technique. Thus, the first nine consecutive subjects presenting for evaluation and agreeing to participate in the study were prescribed eccentric squats with the ankle joint in a standard position (fig 1). The next eight subjects were prescribed eccentric squats on a 25° decline board (fig 2). Both groups undertook an exercise programme twice daily, consisting of three sets of 15 repetitions on a single leg, for 12 weeks. Those subjects with bilateral tendinopathy completed the programme separately for each leg. Subjects were instructed to complete the exercises with the trunk upright. Both groups were instructed to perform the exercise by slowly flexing the knee to 90° of flexion, and, as far as possible, to perform eccentric loading of the quadriceps muscles only and to return to the starting position using the non-injured side.

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If they had bilateral tendinopathy, the arms and both legs were used to return to the starting position. Subjects were asked to increase the load with weights in a backpack once the exercise could be completed without pain. Load was increased so that exercises were always performed with some pain or discomfort. Subjects were not allowed to continue their competitive sporting activity during the first eight weeks of the trial period. After four weeks of the eccentric training regimen, they were allowed to complement it with slow jogging on flat ground, cycling, and water activities, if these could be performed without sharp pain in the patellar tendon. After eight weeks the patients were allowed to gradually return to previous activity.

Outcome measures

Visual analogue scale (100 point) (VAS) scores were recorded at baseline and at completion of the 12 weeks, to record the amount of pain during patellar tendon loading activity—that is, volleyball players during volleyball, soccer players during soccer, etc. A further follow up was conducted at 15 months in the decline squat group of all tendons not managed surgically.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Standard squat</th>
<th>Decline squat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male/Female (n)</td>
<td>8/1</td>
<td>5/3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No of tendons</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight (kg)</td>
<td>77.4 (7.4)</td>
<td>72.6 (10.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height (cm)</td>
<td>181.6 (5.6)</td>
<td>177.8 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unilateral/bilateral</td>
<td>8/1</td>
<td>4/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration of symptoms</td>
<td>14.1 (6.6)</td>
<td>19.1 (17.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(months)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where applicable, values are mean (SD).

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Normal squat (n = 9)</th>
<th>Decline squat (n = 8)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Floorball</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soccer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ice hockey</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Running</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High jump</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volleyball</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skiating</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statistical analysis

Subject characteristics of both groups were tabulated using descriptive statistics. VAS scores recorded before and after the eccentric programme were analysed for each group using a Wilcoxon matched pairs test (Statistica Release 6, 2002; Statsoft Inc). Two tailed significance was set at \( p < 0.05 \). Because of limitations in study design, no between group comparison was performed.

RESULTS

Subjects

Seventeen subjects completed the intervention. At baseline, there were no significant differences in height, weight, and duration of symptoms between groups (table 1). All subjects were competitive in a range of sports before presentation (table 2).

Visual analogue scale

Table 3 shows descriptive results. There was a significant \( (p = 0.004) \) decrease in the amount of pain during activity (mean VAS score reduced from 74.2 to 28.5) in the decline squat group, between the measurements before and after the 12 week eccentric training regimen. No significant change was found in the standard squat group for the same period of training (mean VAS scores 79.0 at baseline and 72.3 at 12 weeks, \( p = 0.144 \)).

Return to activity

Six subjects (nine tendons) in the decline group had returned to pre-injury activity levels in their sports. The remaining subjects had not been able to return to their previous activity level and were referred for surgical treatment. In the standard squat group, only one subject (one tendon) had been able to return to previous activity level. The remaining eight subjects (nine tendons) were also referred for surgical treatment.
and contains low numbers.

be clearly recognised that, by its nature, it is non-randomised
treatment of painful patellar tendinopathy. However, it must
eccentric exercise performed as a decline squat in the
pathy. This pilot study is the first report of the effect of
may have greater efficacy when applied to patellar tendino-
practices. Thus, we sought modes by which eccentric exercise
tendons. We and others have also noted this in our clinical

Few studies have investigated the effect of conservative
was unable to continue his sport because of the development of

The nine tendons in the decline group above were followed
up at 15 months. Four of the six subjects (five of nine
tendons) described in the decline group above were still active at pre-injury levels. One subject (two tendons)
reported no symptoms in his patellar tendons, yet was
able to continue his sport because of the development of
bilateral patellofemoral pain syndrome after jump training.

The results of this pilot study indicate that an eccentric
exercise programme using the decline squat may have
promise for subjects with chronically painful patellar
tendinopathy. However, as the number of patients included
was small, the data should be interpreted cautiously. Randomised studies comparing different models of squat
exercise are needed.

15 month follow up
The nine tendons in the decline group above were followed
up at 15 months. Four of the six subjects (five of nine
tendons) described in the decline group above were still active at pre-injury levels. One subject (two tendons)
reported no symptoms in his patellar tendons, yet was
able to continue his sport because of the development of
bilateral patellofemoral pain syndrome after jump training.

DISCUSSION
Few studies have investigated the effect of conservative
treatment on patellar tendinopathy. Curwin and Stanish noted
that patellar tendinitis responded less well to their
eccentric programme than intervention in several other
tendons. We and others have also noted this in our clinical
practices. Thus, we sought modes by which eccentric exercise
may have greater efficacy when applied to patellar tendinopa-
thy. This pilot study is the first report of the effect of
eccentric exercise performed as a decline squat in the
treatment of painful patellar tendinopathy. However, it must
be clearly recognised that, by its nature, it is non-randomised
and contains low numbers.

In this study, subjects performing the eccentric squat on
the decline board showed good clinical results, with a
decreased amount of pain during activity (VAS score) and a
return to previous activity level. Most subjects who
performed the standard squat had unsatisfactory clinical
results over the 12 week treatment period. We speculate that
the effectiveness of the decline squat may be the result of the
decline board reducing calf muscle tension, allowing better
isolation of the knee extensor mechanism.

We consider that from the results of this small pilot study,
further clinical studies are warranted to test the efficacy of
the exercise. Such studies should use larger numbers, a
randomised study design, and more specific outcome
measures such as the VISA. A similar follow up period
would also be appropriate to better capture the effect of these
exercise programmes on sustained return to sporting activity.
Biomechanical studies comparing the relative loads on the
knee extensor mechanism with a standard and decline squat
would also be of benefit.

Limitations of this study
This study did not use a randomised design, as subjects who
presented first were given squat exercise without a decline
board, because at that time the decline squat had not been
developed. However, we were cautious not to change any
other aspects of the study design for the decline board
intervention. The subject numbers of the study are small,
particularly at the 15 month follow up. Outcome measures
should be extended to include a more specific outcome
measure such as the VISA scoring system developed
specifically for patellar tendinopathy.

CONCLUSION
The results of this pilot study indicate that an eccentric
exercise programme using the decline squat may have
promise for subjects with chronically painful patellar
tendinopathy. However, as the number of patients included
was small, the data should be interpreted cautiously. Randomised studies comparing different models of squat
exercise are needed.

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