Effect of verbal instructions on muscle activity and risk of injury to the anterior cruciate ligament during landing

E J Cowling, J R Steele, P J McNair

Background: Minimising the likelihood of injury to the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) during abrupt deceleration requires proper synchrony of the quadriceps and hamstring muscles. However, it is not known whether simple verbal instructions can alter landing muscle activity to protect the knee.

Objective: To assess the efficacy of verbal instructions to alter landing muscle activity.

Methods: Twenty-four athletes landed abruptly in single limb stance. Sagittal plane motion was recorded with an optoelectric device, and ground reaction force and surface electromyographic data were recorded for the rectus femoris, vastus lateralis, biceps femoris, and semimembranosus muscles. Subjects performed 10 landings per condition: normal landing (N); repeat normal landing (R); landing after instruction to increase knee flexion (K); and landing after instruction to recruit hamstring muscles earlier (M). Muscle bursts immediately before landing were analysed relative to initial foot-ground contact (IC).

Results: The K condition resulted in significantly (p<0.05) greater knee flexion at IC compared with the other conditions. The M condition did not result in earlier hamstring muscle activity, but instead caused significantly (p<0.05) earlier rectus femoris onset relative to IC, with a similar trend for the vastus lateralis. As these muscles are ACL antagonists, earlier onset times would be detrimental to the ACL.

Conclusions: Subjects successfully increased knee flexion during landing following the K condition instruction. However, further research is warranted to establish the efficacy of more extensive lower limb muscle retraining programmes to ensure landings that decrease susceptibility to ACL injury.

METHODS

Subjects

Based on a power analysis (power = 80%), 24 healthy, female, A grade netball players (mean (SD) age 21.8 (4.7) years) with no history of knee injury, trauma, or disease were chosen to participate as experimental subjects in the study. Ethical clearance was gained for the study, and informed consent was obtained from all subjects before testing. All testing was conducted in the Biomechanics Research Laboratory at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia, in accordance with the NH&MRC Statement on Human Experimentation.

Dynamic landing task

For data collection, subjects were required to run forward for about three paces, to leap from their non-dominant leg, and to land on their dominant (test) limb in single limb stance, with their muscle activation patterns during abrupt dynamic tasks such as landing. Prapavessis and McNair showed that athletes could be trained to alter their range of knee joint motion during landing simply by asking them to do so. However, whether simple verbal instructions can be used to alter the muscle activation patterns of athletes during a more complex abrupt deceleration task is not known. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate whether athletes could alter their hamstring muscle activation patterns during a dynamic landing task by following simple verbal instructions. It was hypothesised that a simple verbal instruction would be insufficient information to allow athletes to effectively change their hamstring muscle recruitment patterns during landing.

Abbreviations: ACL, anterior cruciate ligament; IC, initial foot-ground contact; RF, rectus femoris; VL, vastus lateralis; EMG, electromyographic...
their foot centrally located on a force platform while catching a chest height pass. This task was performed for 10 trials under four test conditions: normal landing (N); repeated normal landing (R); landing after a knee angle instruction (K); and landing after a muscle activity instruction (M). The K instruction was as follows: “This time when you run to land I want you to land with your knee bending”. The M instruction stated: “This time when you run to land I want you to turn the muscles at the back of your thigh on earlier and more before landing”. The order of the K and M conditions was reversed in 12 of the 24 subjects to balance the experimental design. The purpose of the repeated normal landing condition was to establish the normal variability in the data between two sets of landing trials independent of variations in verbal instructions.

The same experienced thrower, positioned about 3 m in front of the force platform, was used for all trials. Before data collection, subjects completed a warm up consisting of five minutes of cycling (50–100 W workload) and stretching of their major lower and upper body muscle groups. The purpose of the warm up was to minimise the risk of injury when performing the dynamic landings. Subjects also completed familiarisation trials before data collection to measure their approximate run up distance, and to become familiar with the landing task. The deceleration task was chosen for the study, as abrupt landing has been suggested to be a typical indication of the effect of the verbal instructions on the muscle activity relative to IC (onset to IC; milliseconds); timing of the onset of muscle activity (milliseconds); threshold detector (7% of maximum burst amplitude). The EMG signals were then full wave rectified and low pass filtered (fc = 20 Hz) to eliminate any movement artefact. To assess the temporal characteristics of each muscle, calculated values were visually inspected to confirm that the results truly represented the temporal characteristics of each muscle.

### Table 1: Descriptive data for the ground reaction forces generated during landing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Peak F_{r} [N]</td>
<td>Normal</td>
<td>2303 [519]</td>
<td>2277 [493]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak F_{r} [N]</td>
<td>Repeat</td>
<td>2092 [626]*</td>
<td>2441 [634]*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak F_{r} [N]</td>
<td>Knee instruction</td>
<td>1029 [264]*</td>
<td>1118 [301]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peak F_{r} [N]</td>
<td>Muscle instruction</td>
<td>149 [64]</td>
<td>164 [83]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean (SD).

* Significantly different from remaining three conditions (p<0.05).
† Significantly different from remaining three conditions (p<0.05).

Electromyography

3M Infant Monitoring adhesive silver/silver chloride disposable surface electrodes were placed over the muscle bellies in a bipolar configuration (interdetection surface spacing of 10 mm) parallel to the line of action of the muscle fibres of the rectus femoris (RF), vastus lateralis (VL), semimembranosus, and biceps femoris muscles. Each electrode site was prepared by shaving, abrading, and swabbing the site with diluted ethanol so that the impedance of the skin was less than 6 kΩ (CardioMetrics Artifact Eliminator, model CE01, Australia). Electrode placement sites were confirmed by palpating the muscles while the subjects performed isometric contractions. A reference electrode was placed on the lateral femoral epicondyle. After confirmation of the clarity of the electromyographic (EMG) signals, the wires from the electrodes were taped to the skin surface of each subject’s lower limb to minimise movement artefact. Myoelectric signals were relayed from the electrodes to a Skinpre 8/16 battery powered transmitter (Noraxon, Scottsdale, Arizona, USA; mass = 0.96 kg), which was strapped firmly to the subject’s lower back and supported by Tubifast bandaging. The EMG signals were then relayed from the transmitter to the Telemyo 8/16 receiver through an antenna connected to the transmitter. The analogue output for the muscles from the receiver (± 5 V for full scale) were sampled at 1000 Hz (bandwidth 0–340 Hz) by the OptoTrak software via an OptoTrak Data Acquisition Unit (Northern Digital). This software was also responsible for the synchronisation of the kinematic, kinetic, and EMG data.

Muscle activity analysed during the deceleration task included the burst immediately before IC for each of the four muscles. The EMG data were demeaned using signal processing software. The raw signal was then filtered using a fourth order zero phase shift Butterworth high pass filter (f_p = 15 Hz) to eliminate any movement artefact. To assess the temporal characteristics of the muscle bursts, the filtered EMG data were full wave rectified and low pass filtered (f_p = 20 Hz) to obtain linear envelopes, and subsequently screened with a threshold detector (7% of maximum burst amplitude). The calculated values were visually inspected to confirm that the results truly represented the temporal characteristics of each muscle.

The following temporal variables were then calculated for each of the four muscles from the processed EMG data: duration of the muscle burst (milliseconds); timing of the onset of muscle activity relative to IC (onset to IC; milliseconds); timing of the peak of muscle activity relative to IC (peak to IC; milliseconds). These variables were calculated to provide an indication of the effect of the verbal instructions on the sequence and timing of the contractions of the hamstring and quadriceps muscles during the deceleration task.
Statistical analysis
Means (SD) for the dependent variables were calculated for each of the four test conditions. After normality (Kolmogorov-Smirnov test with Lilliefors’ correction) and equal variance (Levene Median test) of the data had been confirmed, the dependent variables were analysed using a repeated measures analysis of variance with one within factor (test condition). Where a main effect was found, post hoc analysis of the data used a Student-Newman-Keuls test. The α level was set at 0.05.

RESULTS

Ground reaction forces
A significant main effect of test condition on the ground reaction forces was found (F(3,69) = 15.545; at peak FR: q = 4.782) (table 1). However, the K condition resulted in significantly longer quadriceps muscle burst durations than for the remaining three conditions. Conversely, the M condition resulted in significantly longer RF onset to IC times than for the other conditions (fig 1), and, although not significant, a similar trend was noted for the VL muscle. In addition, the M condition resulted in a significantly shorter RF peak to IC time (q = 4.782) compared with the K condition.

DISCUSSION

Ground reaction forces
The average peak ground reaction forces generated by the subjects during the landings were smaller than reported by Cowling and Steele for subjects performing a similar landing task. This may have been due to between study differences in the skill level of the subjects and their sporting participation, as our study used A grade netball players, whereas Cowling and Steele used recreational athletes from a variety of sporting activities who were less experienced at performing the landing task.

Kinematic data
A significant main effect of test condition was again found for the kinematic data characterising knee motion during landing (at IC: F(3,69) = 15.545; at peak FR: F(3,69) = 21.479; p=0.001). That is, although the subjects displayed no significant differences in the knee angles between the N and R landing conditions, the K and M instruction conditions resulted in significantly greater knee flexion at IC and at the time of the peak FR (table 2).

Muscle activation patterns
The test condition also had a significant main effect on the muscle activation data. Post hoc analysis of the data showed that the subjects displayed no significant differences in any of the muscle activity variables between the N and R test conditions (table 3). However, the K condition resulted in significantly longer quadriceps muscle burst durations than for the remaining three conditions. Conversely, the M condition resulted in significantly longer RF onset to IC times than for the other conditions (fig 1), and, although not significant, a similar trend was noted for the VL muscle. In addition, the M condition resulted in a significantly shorter RF peak to IC time (q = 4.782) compared with the K condition.

Table 2 Kinematic variables displayed during landing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Repeat</th>
<th>Knee instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knee angle at IC time (°)</td>
<td>8.7 (3.9)</td>
<td>8.5 (4.0)</td>
<td>11.3 (4.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knee angle at peak FR time (°)</td>
<td>14.5 (2.2)</td>
<td>14.3 (2.1)</td>
<td>18.2 (5.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean (SD).
*Significantly different from normal and repeat conditions (p<0.05).
†Significantly different from knee instruction condition (p<0.05).
‡Significantly different from other three conditions (p<0.05).

Table 3 Muscle activation patterns displayed during landing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Muscle</th>
<th>Normal</th>
<th>Repeat</th>
<th>Knee instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Muscle burst duration (ms)</td>
<td>RF</td>
<td>447 (67)</td>
<td>435 (64)</td>
<td>527 (59)‡</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle burst onset time to IC (ms)</td>
<td>RF</td>
<td>–83 (33)</td>
<td>–77 (27)</td>
<td>–72 (34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muscle burst peak time to IC (ms)</td>
<td>RF</td>
<td>82 (29)</td>
<td>81 (26)</td>
<td>93 (41)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean (SD).
*A negative value indicates that muscle burst onset occurred before IC time.
†Significantly different from other three conditions (p<0.05).
‡Significantly different from other three conditions (p<0.05).
§Significantly different from knee instruction condition (p<0.05)
¶Significantly different from normal condition (p<0.05)
The K instruction condition consistently resulted in lower landing forces than the other three conditions. This finding suggested that the K instruction was effective in modifying the subjects’ landing techniques such that the forces imposed on the body during landing were significantly diminished. Notably, the peak anteroposterior (braking) forces were significantly smaller in the K condition compared with the other three conditions. As the primary role of the ACL is to restrain anterior tibial translation, a decrease in these anteriorly directed braking forces would result in a smaller load for the ACL to withstand. This is positive in terms of the K condition ensuring a less stressful landing for the ACL. However, despite reaching significance, the increased knee flexion achieved by the M and K conditions was only limited (16.4° and 18.2° respectively at peak \( F_{\text{v}} \), time) such that joint compression caused by hamstring muscle contraction was a far greater component in assisting knee stability than the posterior tibial drawer component.

Muscle activation patterns

In agreement with previous studies in which a similar landing movement was performed, subjects in our study displayed the muscle activation sequence recommended by Kain et al., whereby the hamstring muscles were activated before the quadriceps muscles and before IC. Furthermore, peak hamstring muscle activity occurred before IC for all test conditions, whereas peak quadriceps muscle activity occurred after IC.

The lack of significant differences identified in any of the muscle activity variables between the N and R landing conditions confirmed the consistency of the subjects’ landing techniques, which could be expected with this sample of skilled players. In contrast, the K condition resulted in significantly longer burst durations of the quadriceps muscle than for the other three conditions. Quadriceps muscle activity during landing is thought to effect a knee extension moment to prevent the stance limb from “collapsing” under body weight.

The longer quadriceps activity during the K condition is therefore attributed to the need for the eccentric quadriceps contractions to “control” the greater knee flexion during this landing condition.

Contrary to expectations, asking players to turn their hamstring muscles on earlier in the M condition actually resulted in significantly longer RF onset to IC times than for the other conditions (fig 1), with VL displaying a similar, albeit non-significant, trend. As increased shear forces are associated with activation of these muscles, earlier RF and VL onset time before IC would limit the time available for the hamstring muscles to generate a posterior tibial drawer before the onset of the counteracting quadriceps muscle force. Furthermore, the M condition resulted in a significantly shorter RF peak to IC time compared with the K condition. As RF is a powerful ACL antagonist, closer synchronisation of this muscle’s peak activity with the onset of the high braking forces experienced at landing would be less protective to the ACL than a larger time window between these two events. Therefore, not only were the subjects unable to selectively recruit the hamstring muscles as requested, in an attempt to do so they altered their quadriceps muscle synchronisation in a manner that is
Take home message

Simply asking players to flex their knees while they land can decrease the risk against ACL injury and therefore promote safer landings.

suggested to be less protective than in the other landing conditions. These results for the M condition suggest that simply asking players to alter the manner in which they recruit their hamstring muscles, without any accompanying training on how to achieve this, was not beneficial in altering the muscle activity displayed during dynamic landing.

Conclusion

It was concluded that subjects can accurately respond to a simple verbal instruction, such as to increase knee flexion during landing. However, they are unable to respond appropriately to a more complex instruction requiring them to selectively change the way they activate specific muscle groups. In fact, although instructed to alter hamstring muscle activity in the M condition, subjects generated earlier onset times of the antagonistic quadriceps muscles before landing, thereby imposing a greater risk of injury to the ACL during landing. It is postulated that, to alter the activity of specific muscle groups during dynamic landing to better protect the ACL from non-contact injury, subjects may require more specialised muscle activation training. Further research is therefore warranted to investigate whether lower limb muscles can be retrained to alter landing technique, so that safer landing practices can be adopted.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks go to the NSW Sporting Injuries Committee, NSW, Australia for funding this research project.

Authors’ affiliations

E J Cowling, J R Steele, Biomechanics Research Laboratory, University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia
P J McNair, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand

REFERENCES

6 National Health and Medical Research Council. National statement on ethical conduct in research involving humans. Canberra: National Health and Medical Research Council, 1999

This study highlights the efforts in the search for a way to reduce the incidence of ACL injuries, especially in women. A muscle pattern has been identified that may protect the ACL, but can this strategy be trained? The study clearly shows that changes in joint angle can be achieved through simple verbal instruction, but the ability to alter muscle activation patterns is not possible through such instruction. This leads to more questions that need to be answered:

- If knee angle changes can be made easily, what are the optimum ranges at landing and after landing?
- Is it possible to habituate knee angle changes during the stress of a competitive game?
- Is it possible to alter muscle activation in a time frame and manner that can be used by all sportspeople?

L Otago

School of Human Movement and Sport Sciences, University of Ballarat, PO Box 663, Ballarat, Victoria 3353, Australia;

l.otago@ballarat.edu.au

www.bjsportmed.com