Research Article

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Association of Flat Feet with Knee Moments and Western Ontario and McMaster Universities Arthritis Index in Knee Osteoarthritis

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Flat feet are prevalent among individuals with medial compartment knee osteoarthritis (KOA), showing a correlation with elevated knee pain and cartilage degeneration. This study investigates the relationship between calcaneal eversion angle (CEA) and medial longitudinal arch angle (MLAA) with knee kinetics and pain.

Materials and Methods: This analytical observational study included 30 volunteers with moderate KOA. The Vicon motion analysis system and two synchronized force plates were employed to capture level walking and the static standing position to measure CEA and MLAA. The study assessed the first and second peaks of the knee adduction moment, knee adduction moment impulse, peak knee flexion moment, and the peak knee flexion angle at heel strike (PKFA-HS). The Western Ontario and McMaster Universities arthritis index (WOMAC) pain and physical function were evaluated.

Results: A significant positive correlation was found between CEA and the knee pain sub-score (Pearson correlation [PC]=0.446, P=0.011) and WOMAC total score (PC=0.363, P=0.049). Additionally, a significant negative correlation was observed between CEA and peak knee flexion moment/PKFA-HS (PC=-0.418, P=-0.022, and PC=-0.479, P=-0.001, respectively). The results also indicated a negative significant correlation between MLAA and WOMAC pain sub-score (PC=-0.389, P=-0.034).

Keywords: Knee joint; Osteoarthritis; Flat feet; Pain

Conclusion: Increased CEA and decreased MLAA are associated with elevated WOMAC pain sub-score and decreased PKFA-HS in individuals with moderate KOA. Addressing flat feet should be considered in KOA management to enhance pain relief and functional outcomes.

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Introduction

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nee osteoarthritis (KOA) stands as the most prevalent type of arthritis, emerging as a leading cause of knee pain and disability [1]. This condition significantly impacts the quality of life, affecting

daily activities, and leading to increased pain, diminished muscle mass, proprioception deficits, and altered gait mechanics [2]. While studies have traditionally concentrated on local knee alignment [3, 4], recent attention underscores the crucial role of foot status in KOA [5-7]. Biomechanically linked within a closed kinetic chain during walking, the foot, and the knee's interplay influences knee loading, subsequently impacting knee kinetics and kinematics [8-10]. Notably, individuals with KOA often exhibit a more pronated foot type compared to agematched controls [7, 11, 12]. Recent investigations have linked flat feet in KOA individuals with heightened pain and disability [13-15]. Gross et al. highlighted the association of flat feet with increased knee pain and medial cartilage damage in the elderly [15], while Guler et al. demonstrated that coexisting foot deformities, including flat feet, escalate disability levels in women with KOA [14]. Recognizing the biomechanical changes linked to increased pain in KOA individuals with flat feet is pivotal for designing effective treatment plans. The knee adduction moment (KAM) and angular impulse (KAAI) are robust predictors of KOA presence [16], severity [5, 17, 18], and progression rate [19]. Medial compartment KOA individuals typically exhibit higher peak knee adduction moments (PKAMs). KAAI, assessing loading throughout the stance phase, surpasses PKAM in sensitivity for estimating knee load [20]. Recent findings associate the peak knee flexion moment (PKFM) with tibial cartilage changes in medial compartment KOA individuals, with a higher baseline PKFM correlating to greater cartilage thickness loss [21]. PKFM is also sensitive to pain, reducing in individuals experiencing pain [6]; therefore, evaluating these factors in KOA individuals with flat feet is crucial for treatment planning. Limited studies exist, with biomechanical knee changes noted in healthy subjects with flat feet [22, 23]. However, in KOA individuals, only KAM-related parameters have been explored [24]. No studies have compared pain levels and biomechanical parameters in symptomatic KOA individuals with and without flat feet, potentially revealing compensatory strategies. Kimberly Byrnes found that children with flat feet exhibit less KAM than those with normal feet, with no significant relationship between flat foot components and KAM [23]. Hirotaka reported bilateral, but not unilateral, flat feet significantly associated with worse knee pain after adjustments for possible confounders [13]. As changes in foot position in healthy individuals post-fatigue impact knee moments [25, 26], the relationship between flat feet and KAM and PKFM should be concurrently explored in KOA individuals. Precise equipment is required for moment assessment, typically unavailable in clinics. However, the McMaster University Osteoarthritis Index (WOMAC), a disease-specific tool, proves practical for assessing physical function, pain, and stiffness in KOA individuals. In this study, we also investigate the impact of flat feet on WOMAC scores. Two components are measured to determine flat feet, including calcaneal eversion angle (CEA) and medial longitudinal arch angle (MLAA). Understanding these relationships aids in developing prevention and treatment strategies by correcting structural foot deformities. Accordingly, this study explores the relationship between flat foot subcomponents (CEA and MLAA) and knee kinetics, kinematics (first peak of KAM, P1KAM, second peak of KAM [P2KAM], KAAI, PKFM, peak knee flexion angle in heel strike [PKFA-HS]), and WOMAC scores in KOA individuals. The primary hypothesis posits that higher CEA and lower MLAA correlate with PKAMs, KAAI, PKFM KFAI, and PKFA-HS in KOA individuals, aligning with the observed association of flat feet with increased pain and knee cartilage damage. The secondary hypothesis suggests an association between increased pain sub-score and the total score of WOMAC with elevated CEA and reduced MLAA. The study's findings may significantly contribute to the development of effective treatment plans for modifying flat foot subcomponents in KOA individuals.

Materials and Methods

This analytical observational study was conducted in the laboratory of the Physical Therapy Department at Tarbiat Modares University.

Study participants

A total of 62 volunteers with moderate KOA were recruited through community advertisements from November 1, 2019, to February 29, 2020. Sample size calculation, based on the peak (KAMs) from Heiden et al. [2] using G*Power software, version 3.1, indicated that a minimum of 22 participants were required for 80% power and α =0.05. To account for potential subject dropouts, a total of 30 participants were considered sufficient. The inclusion criteria comprised confirmation of grade 2 or 3 unilateral or bilateral KOA (with mild involvement on the opposite side) based on the Kellgren Lawrence scale



Figure 1. A) Calcaneal eversion angle, B) Medial longitudinal arch angle

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via standard anterior/posterior knee joint X-ray, age between 45 and 65, body mass index between 25 and 30 (kg/m²), and the ability to walk on an even surface without aids. Meanwhile, the exclusion criteria included a history of intra-articular injection within the past six months, participation in a strengthening program within the past three months, a history of neurological, vestibular, visual, or musculoskeletal diseases, lower limb joint damage affecting balance, osteoporosis, and any abnormality in the lower limb alignment (screened individually). Foot status was assessed using a 3D motion capture system, measuring the CEA and medial longitudinal arch angle (MLLA). Based on these measurements, 15 individuals with KOA and flat feet and 15 with KOA and normal feet were identified. Eligible participants were fully informed about the study's method and objectives, and they signed a consent form.

Study procedure

For the assessment of MLAA and CEA during level walking, a 3D Vicon motion capture system (Vicon, Oxford, UK) equipped with eight cameras (Vero, 2.2 MP, UK) was utilized. The motion capture system was synchronized with two force plates (9286B; Kistler Co., Winterthur, Switzerland). To accurately capture level-walking and determine MLAA and CEA, sixteen retro-reflective markers based on the standard Plug-In-Gait lower body setup were employed, supplemented by six additional markers.

Evaluation of the foot posture

CEA, representing the frontal plane component of subtalar joint pronation, is commonly employed as an indicator of pronation [27-29]. We adopted a validated method to assess MLAA and CEA for the determination of flat feet [30]. CEA, defined as the acute angle

between the distal midline of the leg and the midline of the calcaneus (Figure 1A), was calculated. MLAA was determined as the angle between a line connecting the most medial aspect of the medial malleolus and the navicular tubercle, and a line connecting the most medial aspect of the navicular tubercle and the first metatarsal head (Figure 1B). Six additional markers were strategically placed to aid in the calculation of MLAA and CEA (Figure 1A and 1B).

To measure MLAA, three markers were positioned on the medial malleolus, navicular landmark, and the innermost center point of the first metatarsophalangeal joint. Four markers were placed in the midline direction of the calcaneus bone and the midline direction of the distal leg for CEA [28, 31, 32]. For CEA determination, the subject assumed a prone position and retro-reflective markers were centered on each of the four bisection points of the bilateral distal legs [31].

MLAA was calculated using three retro-reflective markers on the medial aspect of the medial malleolus, the navicular tubercle, and the first metatarsal head. The angles were computed by capturing a 20-s static standing position at a frequency of 120 Hz. A foot was classified as flat if CEA was equal to or greater than 12°, and MLAA was less than 131° [32]. If CEA was between 3° and 12°, and MLAA was between 131° and 150°, it was categorized as a normal foot posture [32].

Level-walking motion capture

For the level-walking assessment, motion capture was executed employing the 3D Vicon motion capture system synchronized with two force plates. The cameras had a sampling frequency of 120 Hz, while the force plates operated at a frequency of 1200 Hz. The standard Plug-In-Gait lower body markers were strategically



Figure 2. Marker setting on lower limbs according to plug-in gait model [33]

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placed bilaterally on the second metatarsal head, calcanei, malleoli, tibia, femur, femoral epicondyle, and anterior and posterior superior iliac spines (Figure 2) [33].

Before the walking trials, a static calibration trial was conducted to ensure accurate motion capture. The participants then walked barefoot at a self-selected comfortable pace on a 5.3-m walkway. To maintain data quality, three successful walking trials were recorded for each participant. A trial was deemed acceptable if each foot landed on the center of a force plate, and each marker was consistently visible to at least three cameras throughout the entire walking trial.

The participants walked barefoot at their preferred speed, and three gait trials capturing successful heel strike to toe-off on the force platforms were saved for analysis. The initial processing of all kinetic and kinematic data, preceding feature extraction, was performed using Nexus software, version 6.2.1.

The assessment of pain, stiffness, and physical function was carried out using the validated Persian version of the WOMAC questionnaire, administered as a selfassessment [34]. This questionnaire comprises 24 questions categorized into three domains as follows: Pain (5 questions), stiffness (2 questions), and physical function (17 questions). Higher scores indicate a higher intensity of the related symptom.

Data processing

Motion and force data underwent low-pass filtering using a Butterworth filter (fourth order, cut-off frequency 5 Hz) through a custom script developed in MATLABTM R2018B (the MathWorks Inc, Natick, MA). The KAM and KFM were computed as the ground reaction force moment about the knee joint center.

The KAM was reported in the tibial reference frame, with the mediolateral (y) axis parallel to the knee rotation axis. The first and second peaks of KAM (P1KAM and P2KAM) were identified as the maximum moment during 0%–50% (early stance) and 51%–100% (late stance) of the stance phase, respectively. The PKFM was reported with the anterior-posterior (X) axis in the tibial reference frame. The peak time of the first and second KAM and KFM was determined as a percentage of the stance phase.

The PKAMs, KAAI, as the integral time of frontal knee moment), and PKFM were normalized to body weight. Additionally, the PKFA-HS during the stance phase was measured.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS software, version 22.0, with a significance level set at less than 0.05. The Pearson correlation coefficient was employed to explore potential relationships among the variables, including P1KAM, P2KAM, KAAI, PKFM, PKFA-HS, and WOMAC score, with CEA and MLAA. The correlation coefficients (PC) between 0.10 and 0.39 were considered weak, 0.40 to 0.69 as moderate, 0.70 to 0.89 as strong, and greater than 0.90 to 1.00 as very strong [11].

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Characteristics —	OANF (n=15)	OAFF (n=15)	Р	
Age (y)	54.93±4.76	54.20±5.60)	0.805	
Sex (Female/Male), No.	9/6	9/6	1.000	
Height (m)	1.65±8.59	1.62±7.20	0.612	
Weight (kg)	76.93±10.13	79.40±11.05	0.911	
Body mass index (kg/m ²)	27.25±2.41	28.25±2.17	0.167	
Walking speed (m/s)	0.70±0.17	0.71±0.11	0.123	
CEA	4.79±1.80	14.17±2.03 °	<0.001	
MLAA	140.83±3.71	127.22±3.29 ^b	<0.054	
WOMAC (total score)	39.20±5.38	42.07±6.33	0.030	
Pain sub-score	7.66±2.16	10.86±3.07	0.030	
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Table 1. Participant characteristics in the groups

Abbreviations: CEA: Calcaneal eversion angle; MLAA: Medial longitudinal arch angle; OANF: Osteoarthritis, and normal feet; OAFF: Osteoarthritis, and flat feet.

Notes: ^a shows significantly higher than OANF and ^b shows significantly lower than OANF.

Results

Anthropometric characteristics for all 30 subjects based on foot condition are summarized in Table 1. The analysis revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups concerning height (P=0.612), weight (P=0.911), body mass index (P=0.167), and age (P=0.805).

The CEA in the group with osteoarthritis and flat feet (OAFF) was significantly higher than in the group with osteoarthritis and normal feet (OANF) (P<0.001). Additionally, in the OAFF group, the MLAA was significantly lower compared to the OANF group (P<0.054). Furthermore, the OAFF group exhibited a significantly

higher pain sub-score and total WOMAC score compared to the OANF group (P=0.030).

There was a moderate and statistically significant correlation between the CEA and WOMAC pain sub-score (PC=0.446, P=0.01), accompanied by a weak positive correlation with WOMAC total score (PC=0.363, P=0.04). Additionally, a significant negative correlation was identified between CEA and PKFM as well as PK-FA-HS (PC=-0.418, P=0.02 and PC=-0.479, P=0.001, respectively) (Figure 3). No significant correlation was observed in the other parameters (Table 2).

A significant correlation was observed between MLAA and WOMAC pain sub-score (PC=-0.389, P=0.034)

Table 2. Correlation coefficient between CEA, MLLA, and knee parameters

Variables —	KOA (n=30)								
	P1KAM	P2KAM	KAAI	PKFM	PKFA-HS	WOMAC Total Score	Pain Sub- Score		
CEA	PC=0.13	PC=0.126	PC=0.172	PC=-0.418	PC=-0.479	PC=0.363	PC=0.446		
	P=0.941	P=0.506	P=0.364	P=0.022	P=0.001	P=0.049	P=0.011		
MLAA	PC=-0.185	PC=0.257	PC=-0.67	PC=0.294	PC=0.171	PC=-0.162	PC=-0.389		
	P=0.327	P=0.171	P=0.726	P=0.115	P=0.076	P=0.129	P=0.034		

Abbreviations: CEA: Calcaneal eversion angle; MLLA: Medial longitudinal arch angle; PC: Pearson correlation.

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Figure 3. Correlation between calcaneal eversion angle and A) PKFM, B) PKFA-HS, C) Total WOMAC score, D) Pain sub-score

Abbreviations: PKFM: Peak knee flexion moment; PKFA-HS: Peak knee flexion angle at heel strike; WOMAC: Western Ontario and McMaster Universities arthritis index.

(Figure 4). However, no significant correlation was identified between MLAA and the knee moments (Table 2).

Discussion

This study investigated the relationship between the flat feet subcomponents, including CEA and MLLA, with the knee kinetic, kinematic, and pain sub-score and total score of WOMAC in people with moderate KOA. Symptomatic KOA has been identified as the most potent contributor to walking difficulty [35]. KOA is a crucial feature of aborted biomechanics [4, 35]. However, the foot plays an even more immediate role in absorbing the mechanical stresses of ground contact and modifying the postural alignment and mobility at the knee joint and throughout the lower extremity [36]. Little is known about the consequences of abnormal foot morphology (flat foot) for the knee biomechanics and symptoms. The available evidence suggests the existence of biomechanical links between the foot and tibia [8, 9], so alterations in foot posture in a pronated direction in people with KOA may result from a compensatory response to the knee. The current study revealed that the increase in the CEA and decrease in the MLLA were significantly associated with worse OA-related knee pain. Regression analysis showed similar relationships of CEA with total WOMAC score, thereby indicating a robust adverse effect of flat feet on the knee. These results are consistent with Hirotaka and Hiroshi [13] and Gross et al. [15], which showed that a flat foot is associated with increased pain and disability. In terms of the association between the knee kinetics, kinematics, and subcomponents of the flat feet, contrary to our hypothesis, no significant associations were found between CEA/MLAA PKAMs and KAAI. However, there were significant associations between the CEA with the PKFA-HS. Our study's lack of correlation between the KAM and the CEA/MLAA can refute the hypothesis that flatfeet in these people



Figure 4. Correlation between medial longitudinal arch angle and pain sub-score

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is a compensatory response because studies assumed increasing the CEA may be a strategy to reduce the lever arm of KAM and reduce pain. Our finding was also contrary to Levinger et al, which showed that increased rearfoot eversion in people with KOA is associated with reduced KAM during the stance phase of gait [24]. Still, the severity of pain in both groups was mild pain, and more importantly, people with KOA in Levinger's study had variable degrees of malalignment of knee varus. In contrast, in this study, similar to Hirotaka and Hiroshi's study, KOA people without visible varus were allocated to the study [13]. Also, Kimberly et al. did not show a significant association between the KAM and CEA in children with idiopathic flat feet; they stated this angle has low sensitivity to the KAM [23]. The correlations of PKFM and PKFA-HS with CEA were negative. Accordingly, pain may play an important role in creating these relationships because the previous studies showed that the KFM is sensitive to pain, and painful knee people have a reduced peak KFM [6]. In terms of the MLAA and the kinetic/kinematic and WOMAC scores, a significant negative correlation was found between the MLAA and pain WOMAC sub-score. There was no significant relationship found between this angle and KAM peaks, contrary to Kimberly et al. in children with idiopathic flat feet [23]. They suggested medial longitudinal arch height contributes to a lower KAM in healthy children during walking. Consistent with our results, Abourazzak et al. showed no significant relationship between navicular height and the prevalence of KOA [37]. Our findings do not necessarily specify the relationship between foot posture and KOA. The causal relationship between flat-foot posture and OA-related knee pain and cartilage damage is yet to be established. However, few studies

have shown this association [38]. Investigating a causal relationship between flat feet and knee biomechanics and pain is necessary to clarify the potential adverse effects of flat feet. Furthermore, longitudinal studies are needed to determine whether the flat foot primarily causes biomechanical changes, pain, and cartilage damage in the knee or a compensatory response to biomechanical changes and pain in the knee. It is needed to follow children with flatfeet in the long term. Despite these limitations, our findings suggest that the assessment of foot alignment should aid in the identification of individuals who may deteriorate their knee symptoms or load-to-foot abnormalities. Thus, our results show CEA and MLAA as two flat foot components associated with the pain WOMAC sub-score, but only CEA had a significant correlation with the PKFA-HS and PKFM. Our results can be clinically significant because they show a high impact of CEA to increase pain and reduce knee joint physical function (based on pain sub-score and total score of WOMAC), so it may be advisable to consider people with KOA. Considering that flat feet can negatively impact postural balance and performance [39], without considering the flat feet status, physical therapists should not try to modify the gait pattern of people with KOA because some compensatory patterns were provided to reduce KFM and improve knee pain while walking. We suggest future studies compare KOA severity (based on the Kellgren Lawrence scale and degree of painfulness) with CEA and MLAA to determine the correlation between the flat foot and knee biomechanics. Determining the relationship between the flat foot and knee KAM/KFM, which represents the contact force of the joint, can be crucial in providing treatment methods

and prescribing orthoses to reduce pain and improve the quality of life in people with KOA.

Conclusion

This study found no significant association between CEA/MLAA and the KAM. Still, there was a significant association between the CEA with the PKFA-HS and PKFM. In people with KOA, there was a significant positive correlation between pain WOMAC sub-score/total score and CEA; also, a significant negative correlation between pain WOMAC sub-score and MLAA. These results can be clinically important because they show a more potent effect of CEA on increasing pain and reducing knee joint physical function and PKFM/PKFA-HS. It is advisable to consider feet status in the people with KOA It is recommended to consider the position of the feet in people with KOA because subsequent changes in the length and strength of the muscles and disturbances in static and dynamic balance can cause increased pain and more functional impairment in people with KOA.

Study limitations

The important limitation of this study is the small sample size. In addition, our assessments were performed only on the simple level of walking, while the effect of flat feet on complex functional tasks and after fatigue may have a more significant impact on the kinetics and kinematics of the knee. Thus, there is a need for further, longitudinal, prospective studies using kinematics/kinematics analyses in larger samples to support the causality between flat feet components and KOA. Considering foot position in KOA people is crucial due to potential muscle length, strength changes, and balance disturbances, leading to heightened pain and functional impairment.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with ethical guidelines

The study received approval from the local Institutional Research Ethics Committee of Tarbiat Modares University (IR.MODARES.REC. 1397.217).

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Authors' contributions

The authors contributed equally to preparing this article.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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