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Effects of fatigue on lower limb, pelvis and trunk kinematics and muscle activation: Gender differences

Giovanna Camparis Lessi, Ana Flávia dos Santos, Luis Fylipe Batista, Gabriela Clemente de Oliveira, Fábio Viadanna Serrão $*$

Department of Physical Therapy, Federal University of São Carlos, São Carlos, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

Background: Muscle fatigue is associated with biomechanical changes that may lead to anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injuries. Alterations in trunk and pelvis kinematics may also be involved in ACL injury. Although some studies have compared the effects of muscle fatigue on lower limb kinematics between men and women, little is known about its effects on pelvis and trunk kinematics. The aim of the study was to compare the effects of fatigue on lower limb, pelvis and trunk kinematics and muscle activation between men and women during landing. Methods: The participants included forty healthy subjects. We performed kinematic analysis of the trunk, pelvis, hip and knee and muscle activation analysis of the gluteal muscles, vastus lateralis and biceps femoris, during a single-leg landing before and after fatigue. Results: Men had greater trunk flexion than women after fatigue. After fatigue, a decrease in peak knee flexion and an increase in Gmax and BF activation were observed. Conclusion: The increase in the trunk flexion can decrease the anterior tibiofemoral shear force resulted from the lower knee flexion angle, thereby decreasing the stress on the ACL.

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1. Introduction

One of the most common injuries during sports activity is anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) disruption ([Yu and Garrett, 2007](#page-5-0)). ACL injury tends to occur without contact in activities that involve cutting, pivoting, decelerating, or landing from a jump ([Ireland, 1999;](#page-4-0) [Hewett et al., 2005; Yu and Garrett, 2007](#page-4-0)). In addition, women are four to six times more prone to ACL injuries than men, when participating in the same sporting activity [\(Boden et al., 2000](#page-4-0)).

There are several intrinsic and extrinsic factors linked to the noncontact ACL injury disparity between genders ([Arendt and](#page-4-0) [Dick, 1995](#page-4-0)). Fatigue is an extrinsic factor affecting the neurological and musculoskeletal systems ([Chappell et al., 2005](#page-4-0)). Most athletic injuries occur in the later stages of activities and competition, indicating that fatigue may play a crucial role in the incidence of injury ([Hawkins and Fuller, 1999; Hawkins et al., 2001; Price et al., 2004\)](#page-4-0). Muscle fatigue can lead to a reduced ability of the muscles to generate strength ([Lattier et al., 2004\)](#page-4-0) and altered neuromuscular control ([McLean et al., 2007\)](#page-5-0). In this context, fatigue causes abnormal and potentially hazardous movement strategies, increasing the risk of a noncontact ACL injury during landing ([Santamaria and](#page-5-0) [Webster, 2010\)](#page-5-0).

Several studies have evaluated the effects of fatigue on landing biomechanics, demonstrating the influence of fatigue on lower limb kinematics and differences between genders [\(McLean et al.,](#page-5-0) [2007; Kernozek et al., 2008; Gehring et al., 2009; Brazen et al.,](#page-5-0) [2010; Liederbach et al., 2014\)](#page-5-0). The most commonly studied variables are knee and hip kinematics in the sagittal and frontal planes. However, studies involving the effects of lower limb muscle fatigue on landing kinematics in subjects of different genders did not include assessments of proximal segments, such as the pelvis or trunk.

Decreases of lower limb muscle activation due to fatigue can result in changes in pelvis and trunk position. The influence of fatigue on trunk position is an important aspect because it can change the loads on the knee joint and the stress on the ACL ([Kulas et al.,](#page-4-0) [2012](#page-4-0)). In the sagittal plane, the trunk extension is a common used strategy to decrease the demand on fatigued/weak hip extensor muscles [\(Powers, 2010](#page-5-0)). However, a smaller trunk flexion during landing increases the quadriceps muscle activation ([Blackburn](#page-4-0) [and Padua, 2009\)](#page-4-0) and, consequently, the anterior tibiofemoral shear force and the stress on the ACL (especially with the knee close to full extension) ([Kulas et al., 2012](#page-4-0)).

[⇑] Corresponding author at: Department of Physical Therapy, São Carlos Federal University, Rodovia Washington Luis, km 235, CEP: 13565-905, São Carlos, SP, Brazil.

E-mail address: fserrao@ufscar.br (F.V. Serrão).

In the frontal plane, a decreased activation of the hip abductor muscles due to fatigue could lead to an excessive contralateral pelvic drop (Trendelenburg sign). A typical compensation for this activation deficit is ipsilateral trunk lean (towards to the support limb) ([Powers, 2010\)](#page-5-0). However, ipsilateral trunk lean can cause the ground reaction force vector to pass laterally with respect to the knee joint center, creating an abduction moment at the knee ([Powers, 2010; Nakagawa et al., 2012](#page-5-0)). This is an important aspect, since [Hewett et al. \(2005\)](#page-4-0) reported that the knee abduction moment is a predictor of ACL injury in female athletes.

To the best of the authors' knowledge, only [Liederbach et al.](#page-4-0) [\(2014\)](#page-4-0) evaluated the influence of lower limb muscle fatigue on trunk kinematics during landing and compared these data between genders, which suggests that more studies are necessary. Specifically, [Liederbach et al. \(2014\)](#page-4-0) found an increase in trunk flexion and ipsilateral trunk lean during the single-leg landing after fatigue, but no difference between men and women. However, these authors did not evaluate the effect of fatigue on lower limb muscles activation. Therefore, it is unclear whether there is a relationship between changes in muscle activation and changes in trunk position after the application of a fatigue protocol for the lower limb muscles.

The purpose of this study was to compare the effects of lower limb muscle fatigue on knee, hip, pelvis and trunk kinematics and lower limb muscle activity between men and women during the single-leg drop vertical jump landing. Based on the biomechanical differences between men and women, the hypothesis of this study is that fatigue will alter in different ways the landing biomechanics in men and women.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Based on a previous study ([Kernozek et al., 2008](#page-4-0)) with statistical significance set at a two-sided level of 0.05, a power of 0.8, and a correlation among repeated measures of 0.5, we estimated that we needed a minimum of 18 subjects per group. Participation was voluntary, and all participants signed a written informed consent form, and the study was approved by the University's Ethics Committee for Human Investigations (no. 24379). For this study, 40 healthy recreational athletes between the ages of 18 and 30 years old volunteered. The participants included 20 healthy males recreational athletes (age 22.8 ± 2.9 years; height 1.65 ± 0.1 m; body mass 60.6 ± 7.4 kg) and 20 healthy females recreational athletes (age 23.6 ± 3.0 years; height 1.78 ± 0.1 m; body mass 77.7 ± 11.7 kg) with no history of any lower limb dysfunction, surgery or joint previous trauma. We defined recreational athlete as anyone participating in aerobic or athletic activity at least three times per week [\(Heinert et al., 2008](#page-4-0)). All participants underwent an initial evaluation and their dominant limbs were assessed. The dominant limb was defined by asking the participants which leg they would use to kick a ball as far as possible ([Orishimo and Kremenic, 2006](#page-5-0)).

2.2. Data collection

A kinematic and electromyographic (EMG) evaluation was performed during a single-leg drop vertical jump. Prior to data collection three warm-up trials were used to familiarize the participant with the task. All participants wore minimal clothing (a T-shirt and shorts) and athletic shoes provided by the examiner.

Participants performed a single-leg drop vertical jump, before and immediately after performing a general fatigue protocol. The participants were instructed to hold their arms across their chest, avoiding obstructing obstruct the pelvis markers, step off a 31 cm box without jumping up, stepping down or loosing balance, and land with the dominant limb ([Lessi and Serrão, 2015\)](#page-4-0). Immediately after foot strike, the participants performed a maximal effort single-leg vertical jump, with the dominant limb, while avoiding touching the ground with the contralateral leg [\(Lessi and Serrão,](#page-4-0) [2015\)](#page-4-0). No verbal or visual clues were given for the landing techniques at any time ([Kellis and Kouvelioti, 2009\)](#page-4-0).

The fatigue protocol consisted in sets of 10 bilateral squats (90° knee flexion), 2 bilateral maximal effort vertical jumps and 20 steps (31 cm high stair). Participants stepped up and down with the dominant leg. Prior to the fatigue protocol, the participants performed a maximal effort single-leg hop for a distance to set the maximal distance reached without muscle fatigue. An average of 3 hops was used as a reference. Maximal fatigue was defined as the point at which the hop distance was reduced at least by 20% ([Orishimo and Kremenic, 2006\)](#page-5-0). Between the protocol sets a Borg (CR10) scale was used to quantify the perceived exertion.

Three-dimensional motion analysis was performed using a sixcamera motion analysis system (Qualisys Motion Capture System, Qualisys Medical AB, Sweden). Kinematic data were sampled at 240 Hz. Fourteen passive reflective markers with a diameter of 15 mm were affixed over the spinous process of the seventh cervical vertebra, sternum, right and left acromium, right and left iliac crest, sacrum, greater trochanter of both femurs, lateral and medial femoral epicondyles, lateral and medial maleoli, and distal phalange of the second toe. To track the motion, 4 clusters over the back and dominant lower limb were used. The back clusters were built with 3 non-collinear markers and placed over the spinous process of the sixth thoracic vertebra and second lumbar vertebra. The limb clusters were built with 4 non-collinear markers and placed over the lateral side of the thigh and lateral side of the shank. The same researcher placed the markers on all participants.

To determine the test-retest reliability of the kinematics measurements, a priory study was conducted. Eight participants were tested on 2 occasions, which were separated by 5–7 days. The intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC_{3,1}) and standard error of measurement were, respectively, 0.97 and 1.58° for knee flexion, 0.85 and 1.34 \degree for knee abduction, 0.97 and 1.47 \degree for hip flexion, 0.88 and 1.15° for hip adduction, 0.97 and 0.53 $^{\circ}$ for pelvis contralateral drop, 0.96 and 1.42 \degree for trunk flexion and 0.84 and 1.50 \degree for ipsilateral trunk lean.

The EMG data were simultaneously recorded with the kinematics at 2400 Hz sample rate. Wireless surface electrodes (TrignoTM Wireless System, Delsys, Inc., USA) were used for EMG analysis. The activity of the vastus lateralis (VL), biceps femoralis (BF), gluteus medius (GMed) and gluteus maximus (GMax) muscles were recorded during landing. Before electrode placement, the skin was shaved, abraded, and cleaned with alcohol. The surface electrodes were applied to the skin according to the SENIAM recommendations ([Hermens et al., 2000\)](#page-4-0). Each electrode pre-amplified the signal and was interfaced to an amplifier unit (Delsys, Inc., USA, operating range 40 m, transmission frequency 2.4 GHz, CMRR >80 dB; bandwidth of 450 Hz at >80 dB/s). The EMG signals were digitized using a 16-bit analog-to-digital board synchronized with the motion analysis data.

2.3. Data reduction

Kinematic data were processed using Visual 3D (Version 3.9; Cmotion Inc., USA). The Cardan angles were calculated using the joint coordinate system definitions recommended by the International Society of Biomechanics ([Wu et al., 2002](#page-5-0)) relative to the static standing trial. The knee angles were calculated as the shank movement relative to the thigh reference; the hip angles were calculated as the thigh movement relative to the pelvis reference; and

the pelvis and trunk angles were calculated relative to the global coordinate system (global horizontal axis and global vertical axis). The knee joint center was determined as the midpoint between the medial and lateral epicondyles of the femur. The hip joint center was estimated as one-quarter of the distance from the ipsilateral to the contralateral greater trochanter [\(Weinhandl and O'Connor,](#page-5-0) [2010](#page-5-0)). Kinematic data were filtered using a fourth-order zero-lag Butterworth 12-Hz low-pass filter.

A custom program in Matlab (Mathworks, USA) was used to analyze the kinematic variables of interest. The first landing was analyzed. The joint angles at the first initial contact and the peak angles during the landing phase (from the initial contact to maximal knee flexion) were considered for analysis. The initial contact was defined as the instant in which the vertical velocity of the marker fixed on the second toe was zero. The velocity was calculated from the first derivative of the toe marker ([Brindle et al., 2003\)](#page-4-0). The kinematic angles of interest at initial contact and peak angles during landing included the following: trunk flexion, trunk ipsilateral lean, pelvis contralateral drop, hip flexion, hip adduction, knee flexion and knee abduction. By convention, the positive kinematic values represented flexion, abduction, ipisilateral trunk lean and pelvic drop angles.

All EMG data were processed using Matlab (Mathworks, USA). Raw EMG signals were band-pass filtered at 20–400 Hz, fullwave rectified and smoothed by a symmetrical moving root mean square (RMS) filter (20 ms time constant). The RMS activity (mean average amplitude) was calculated during the landing phase (from the initial contact to maximal knee flexion). The peak RMS activity during the landing phase represents 100% activity and the average RMS data during landing were expressed as a percentage of the peak RMS during landing [\(Zebis et al., 2011, 2008\)](#page-5-0). The EMG normalization was performed for each landing separately.

For the kinematic and EMG variables, the average of three trials was used for the statistical analysis.

3. Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS statistical software (version 17.0; SPSS, Inc., IL). All data were expressed as the mean and standard deviation. The Student's t-tests for independent samples were used to verify the differences in the demographic characteristics of the groups. The kinematic and EMG data were considered dependent variables. The effects of fatigue on the dependent variables were evaluated by a two-way (gender X fatigue) ANOVA with a mixed-model design, with the fatigue as a repeated measure. When significant differences were found, a pairwise comparison was performed using the Bonferroni-adjusted ttests. All analyses were conducted with an alpha level of 0.05.

4. Results

No significant difference was observed between participants in terms of the amount of physical activity practice per week (men 4.3 ± 1.1 h per week and women 3.8 ± 0.9 h per week; $P > 0.05$). Men completed an average of 10.4 ± 2.8 successful series of the fatigue protocol and reported a mean Borg rating of 8.2 ± 1.2 . Women completed an average of 9.1 ± 3.0 successful series of the fatigue protocol and reported a mean Borg rating of 8.2 ± 0.8 ; there were no significant differences between the groups for these variables ($P > 0.05$).

The kinematic results are reported in [Tables 1 and 2,](#page-3-0) and [Fig. 1.](#page-3-0) The RMS activity results are reported in [Table 3.](#page-4-0) Gender X fatigue interactions were observed for the peak trunk flexion during landing ($P = 0.024$), knee in frontal plane at initial contact ($P = 0.047$) and BF average amplitude of activation during landing $(P = 0.037)$. Men had increased peak trunk flexion during landing after fatigue compared to before fatigue $(P = 0.001$; mean difference $(MD) = 7.7^{\circ}$: 95% confidence interval for difference (95%CI) = 4.5–11.0). At the initial contact after fatigue women presented greater knee abduction angles compared to men after fatigue $(P = 0.013$; MD = 2.8°; 95%CI = 0.6–4.9). Men had decreased knee abduction at initial contact after fatigue compared to before fatigue $(P = 0.035; MD = 0.8^{\circ}; 95\% CI = 0.06-1.6$). Furthermore, women presented greater BF average amplitude of activation after fatigue compared to before fatigue ($P = 0.004$; MD = 7.0%; 95%CI = 2.4– 11.6). After fatigue women shown greater BF activation compared to men after fatigue ($P = 0.043$; MD = 5.9%; 95%CI = 0.2-11.6).

Moreover, some main effects were observed. After fatigue, the following peak angles were observed during landing: increased peak trunk flexion $(P < 0.001; \text{ MD} = 5.1^{\circ}; \text{ 95%CI} = 2.7-7.4);$ increased peak contralateral pelvic drop ($P < 0.001$; MD = 1.1° ; 95%CI = $0.5-1.6$) and decreased peak knee flexion ($P < 0.001$; $MD = 4.1^{\circ}$; 95%CI = 2.6–5.6). Also, after fatigue an increased contralateral pelvic drop was observed at the initial contact $(P < 0.001$; MD = 0.9° ; 95%CI = $0.4 - 1.4$) and the average amplitude of activation during landing for BF $(P = 0.037; \text{ MD} = 3.5\%; 95\%$ $CI = 0.2 - 6.7$ and GMax ($P = 0.013$; MD = 4.4%; 95%CI = 1.0–7.6) were increased. Furthermore, women presented significantly greater knee abduction at the initial contact $(P = 0.039)$; $MD = 2.2^{\circ}$; 95%IC = 0.1–4.3) and greater peak knee abduction during landing ($P = 0.005$; MD = 3.3°; 95%CI = 1.1–5.5) than men.

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to evaluate the effects of muscle fatigue in trunk, pelvis, hip and knee kinematics, and lower limb muscle activation between men and women. The hypothesis that fatigue would alter landing biomechanics in men and women, but with different alterations between genders was confirmed.

The main innovation of this study was the evaluation of the effects of fatigue on the trunk and pelvis angles. The change in the trunk position can alter the loads on the knee joint [\(Powers,](#page-5-0) [2010](#page-5-0)) and a deficit in trunk neuromuscular control is a predictor of knee injury risk in women ([Zazulak et al., 2007\)](#page-5-0). In the present results, after fatigue, men showed greater trunk flexion when compared to women. After the fatigue protocol, an increase in the peak trunk flexion was also observed by [Liederbach et al. \(2014\)](#page-4-0) during a single-leg landing in healthy individuals. Trunk flexion moves the resultant vector of the ground reaction force forward, increasing the external hip flexion moment and in order to control this increase, the hip extensor muscles must generate a greater amount of force, activating more muscle fibers ([Powers, 2010\)](#page-5-0). This could explain the increase in the GMax and BF activation observed during landing after fatigue. According to the study of [Kulas et al.](#page-4-0) [\(2012\),](#page-4-0) increased trunk flexion minimized ACL deformation during squatting even in lower angles of knee flexion. In addition, [Blackburn and Padua \(2008\)](#page-4-0) report that females typically display a more erect posture during landing compared to men, potentially contributing to the higher female ACL injury rate.

In this study, fatigue increased the contralateral pelvic drop in initial contact and during landing. It should be noted that although there was an increase in the contralateral pelvic drop, there was no change in the GMed activation. Note that the fatigue protocol emphasized the quadriceps and hip extensor muscles. Therefore, it is possible that fatigue reduced GMax's ability to generate strength. The GMax muscle acts in hip extension and lateral rotation; also, its upper fibers act in hip abduction [\(Lyons et al.,](#page-4-0) [1983\)](#page-4-0). Therefore, that muscle can contribute to the maintenance of pelvic stability in the frontal plane, assisting in the GMed action. Then, GMax fatigue may be involved in the increased pelvic con-

Table 1

Mean ± standard deviation (degrees) for the kinematic data at initial contact.

Flexion (+); extension (-); abduction (+); adduction (-); drop (+); elevation (-); ipisilateral lean (+); contralateral lean (-). a Significant difference compared to men prefatigue (P < 0.05).

b Significant difference compared to men postfatigue (P < 0.05).

 c Significant difference compared to men ($P < 0.05$).

^d Significant difference compared to prefatigue ($P < 0.05$).

Table 2 Mean ± standard deviation (degrees) for the kinematic peak angles during landing.

Flexion (+); extension (-); abduction (+); adduction (-); drop (+); elevation (-); ipisilateral lean (+); contralateral lean (-). a Significant difference compared to men prefatigue (P < 0.05).

 \overline{b} Significant difference compared to men ($P < 0.05$).

 $\frac{c}{s}$ Significant difference compared to prefatigue ($P < 0.05$).

Fig. 1. Average time normalized curves for joint angles during the landing phase before and after fatigue for knee flexion, knee abduction, pelvis drop and trunk flexion.

Data are given as the mean ± standard deviation, expressed as a percentage of the peak EMG during landing.

Significant difference compared to women prefatigue ($P < 0.05$).

Significant difference compared to men postfatigue ($P < 0.05$).

 ϵ Significant difference compared to prefatigue ($P < 0.05$).

tralateral drop. We must consider that although a significant increase in the contralateral pelvic drop was observed, the increase was approximately one degree, and the clinical implications of this small increase are still unclear.

The present results showed greater knee abduction in women compared to men, agreeing with the results reported in the literature (Kernozek et al., 2005; Jacobs et al., 2007). These results indicated that in a single-leg landing women are in greater injury risk compared to men, since Hewett et al. (2005) demonstrated that the knee valgus angle (abduction) is a predictor of the ACL injury risk in women. Fatigue has failed to increase knee abduction angle, perhaps because the fatigue protocol has focused on the muscles that control movements in the sagittal plane and not in the frontal plane (as noted the GMed had no activation change).

The knee sagittal plane position is also related to ACL injury. In the present study, no differences were observed between the genders, but the peak knee flexion during landing decreased after fatigue. Chappell et al. (2005) reported that the decrease in knee flexion angle during landing was associated with increased anterior tibiofemoral shear force. Therefore, it is possible that the greater trunk flexion and consequent increased activation of the hamstring muscles could minimize the increase in the tibiofemoral shear force resulting from the lower knee flexion. In this way, trunk flexion could be used, as a strategy to reduce stress on the ACL in the presence of fatigue.

The authors acknowledge that this study has some limitations. The evaluation of the strength of the hip and knee muscles might improve our understanding of the alterations resulting from fatigue. In addition, the fatigue protocol primarily consisted of bilateral activities in the sagittal plane. Therefore, while one of the objectives of the study was to evaluate the effects of fatigue in the GMed activation, it is possible that the protocol used did not generated fatigue in this muscle. Therefore, future studies should apply a fatigue protocol that emphasizes the action of GMed and assess whether the kinematic and EMG changes differ from those observed in the present study.

6. Conclusions

The increase in the peak trunk flexion may help to decrease the anterior tibiofemoral shear force resulted from lower knee flexion angle, thereby decreasing the stress on the ACL. Men presented greater trunk flexion after fatigue compared to women, suggesting that males were able to better adapt to the fatigue condition.

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Giovanna Camparis Lessi. Received the MSc degree in Physical Therapy in 2011 and a Ph.D in Physical Therapy in 2015, both from the Federal University of São Carlos. Her PhD focused on biomechanics adaptations after fatigue in individuals with ACL injury. Her special interests include biomechanical changes following knee injury and signal processing of human movement.

Ana Flávia dos Santos. Received the MSc degree in Physical Therapy in 2014 from the Federal University of São Carlos. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Federal University of São Carlos. Her research interests focuses on biomechanical adaptations in individuals with patellofemoral pain during running.

Luis Fylipe Batista. Received a B.Sc in Physical Therapy from Federal University of São Carlos in 2015. He is currently finishing his specialization course in sports rehabilitation at the Federal University of São Paulo.

Gabriela Clemente de Oliveira. Received a B.Sc in Physical Therapy from Federal University of São Carlos in 2014. In 2015 she specialized in sports rehabilitation at the Federal University of São Paulo. At present she works in clinic where she is specialized in athlete rehabilitation.

Fábio Viadanna Serrão. Received the B.Sc in Physical Therapy from Methodist University of Piracicaba (1996), MSc degree in Physical Therapy from the Federal University of São Carlos (1998) and Ph.D in Physical Therapy from the Federal University of São Carlos (2004). He is currently Associate Professor of the Federal University of São Carlos at the Physical Therapy department. His research interests are assessment and rehabilitation in lower limb injuries and biomechanics.