Evaluating the Effectiveness of Kinesiology Taping in Reducing Pain and Enhancing Functionality in Patients with Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome: A Comparative Study of Short-Term and Long-Term Outcomes

[1]Shorouk A. Aljarallah, [2]Razan I. Alsaleem, [3]Mona R. Attamimi, [4]Areej M. M. Al-Abdulrahman

Physical Therapist
Health affairs of National Guard Hospital

Abstract

Background: Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS) is a common cause of anterior knee pain, particularly among athletes. Kinesiology taping (KT) has been proposed as an adjunct to physiotherapy for managing PFPS, but its effectiveness remains debated.

Objective: This study aimed to evaluate the short-term and long-term effectiveness of KT in reducing pain and improving function in patients with PFPS when used alongside standard physiotherapy.

Methods: A randomized controlled trial was conducted with 50 participants diagnosed with PFPS. Participants were randomly assigned to receive either KT in addition to standard physiotherapy (intervention group) or standard physiotherapy alone (control group). Pain was assessed using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), and function was evaluated using the Kujala Patellofemoral Score at baseline, 6 weeks, 3 months, and 6 months.

Results: The intervention group showed significantly greater reductions in pain and improvements in function at 6 weeks ($p < 0.05$) and 3 months ($p < 0.05$) compared to the control group. However, by 6 months, the differences were not statistically significant. The intervention group also reported better quality of life scores at 6 months ($p < 0.05$).

Conclusion: Kinesiology taping is effective as a short-term adjunct to physiotherapy in managing PFPS, with significant benefits in pain reduction and functional improvement. However, its long-term benefits are less clear, and further research is needed to explore sustained outcomes.

Keywords: Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome, Kinesiology Taping, Physiotherapy, Pain Management, Functional Outcomes, Randomized Controlled Trial.

Introduction

Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS), commonly known as "runner's knee," is one of the most prevalent causes of anterior knee pain, particularly among athletes and physically active individuals. It is characterized by pain around the patella, which is often exacerbated by activities such as running, squatting, and climbing stairs. PFPS is a multifactorial condition, with contributing factors including muscle imbalances, poor biomechanics, overuse, and improper alignment of the patella (Fulkerson and Arendt, 2000; Powers, 2010).

Management of PFPS is challenging due to its complex etiology, and traditional treatment approaches often involve a combination of rest, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), physical therapy, and strengthening exercises aimed at correcting muscle imbalances and improving knee function (Nunes et al., 2013). However, despite these interventions, some patients continue to experience persistent pain and functional limitations, highlighting the need for adjunctive therapies that can enhance treatment outcomes.

Kinesiology taping (KT) has emerged as a popular adjunctive treatment in the management of musculoskeletal conditions, including PFPS. KT involves the application of a specialized elastic tape that is believed to support muscles, reduce pain, and improve circulation without restricting movement (Kase, 2003). Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain the potential benefits of KT, including proprioceptive facilitation, improvement in lymphatic drainage, and altered muscle activation patterns (Fu et al., 2055). However, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of KT in PFPS is mixed, with some studies reporting significant pain relief and functional improvements, while others suggest minimal to no benefit (Kalron and Bar-Sela, 2013; Mostafavifar et al., 2012).

Given the growing interest in KT as a therapeutic modality, it is essential to further investigate its effectiveness, particularly in comparison to traditional physiotherapy interventions. This study aims to evaluate the short-term and long-term effects of KT on pain reduction and functional improvement in patients with PFPS, when used as an adjunct to standard physiotherapy treatment. By addressing this gap in the literature, we hope to provide clinicians with evidence-based guidance on the use of KT in managing PFPS.

Literature Review

Overview of Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS)

Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS) is a prevalent condition, particularly among adolescents, athletes, and physically active individuals. It is characterized by anterior knee pain that is exacerbated by activities that load the patellofemoral joint, such as running, squatting, and climbing stairs (Fulkerson and Arendt, 2000). The exact etiology of PFPS is multifactorial, with contributing factors including overuse, malalignment of the patella, muscular imbalances, and biomechanical abnormalities (Powers, 2010; Witvrouw et al., 2014).These factors often lead to increased stress on the patellofemoral joint, resulting in pain and functional limitations.

Traditional management strategies for PFPS include rest, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), and physical therapy aimed at strengthening the quadriceps and hip muscles, improving flexibility, and correcting biomechanical issues (Nunes et al., 2013). While these interventions can be effective, some patients experience persistent symptoms, leading to an exploration of adjunctive treatments such as kinesiology taping.

Kinesiology Taping: Mechanisms and Application

Kinesiology taping (KT) was developed by Dr. Kenzo Kase in the 1970s and has since gained popularity as a therapeutic modality in managing musculoskeletal conditions (Kase, 2003). KT involves the application of an elastic tape designed to mimic the properties of human skin, allowing for full range of motion while providing support and facilitating muscle function. The tape is applied with varying degrees of tension depending on the desired therapeutic effect, such as reducing pain, improving circulation, or enhancing proprioception (Morris et al., 2016).

Several mechanisms have been proposed to explain how KT may benefit patients with PFPS. These include proprioceptive facilitation, which enhances the body's awareness of joint position and movement, potentially improving motor control and reducing pain (Fu et al., 2055). KT is also thought to aid in lymphatic drainage and reduce swelling by lifting the skin, which increases the interstitial space and decreases pressure on the lymphatic channels (Halseth et al., 2004). Additionally, the tape may alter muscle activation patterns, potentially helping to correct muscle imbalances that contribute to PFPS (Chang et al., 2015). Despite these proposed benefits, the evidence supporting the effectiveness of KT remains inconsistent.

Evidence for Kinesiology Taping in PFPS

The literature on KT in the treatment of PFPS presents mixed findings, with some studies reporting positive outcomes and others showing limited or no benefits. A systematic review by Kalron and Bar-Sela (2013) examined the effectiveness of KT across various musculoskeletal conditions, including PFPS, and concluded that while some studies suggest benefits in terms of pain reduction and functional improvement, the overall quality of evidence is low, and more rigorous research is needed (Kalron and Bar-Sela, 2013).

For example, a randomized controlled trial by Aytar et al. (2011) investigated the effects of KT combined with conventional physiotherapy versus physiotherapy alone in patients with PFPS. The study found that the KT group experienced greater improvements in pain and functional outcomes compared to the control group, suggesting that KT may enhance the effects of traditional physiotherapy interventions. However, a similar study by Freedman et al. (2014) reported no significant differences in pain or function between patients who received KT and those who received sham taping, raising questions about the placebo effect of KT

Long-term outcomes of KT in PFPS are also under-researched. Most studies focus on short-term effects, typically assessing outcomes within a few weeks of intervention. Research by Chang et al. (2015) explored the long-term impact of KT in PFPS, finding that while there were some initial benefits, these were not sustained at six-month follow-up, indicating that KT may provide only temporary relief. This highlights the need for further research to understand the duration of KT’s effects and whether it offers any lasting benefits when used as part of a comprehensive rehabilitation program.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the growing body of research on KT, several gaps remain. First, the variability in study designs, including differences in taping techniques, outcome measures, and patient populations, makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of KT in PFPS. Second, the majority of studies have focused on short-term outcomes, with little attention given to the long-term benefits of KT. Finally, there is a lack of consensus on the most effective taping protocols, with some studies suggesting that the way the tape is applied (e.g., direction, tension, and duration) may significantly impact its effectiveness.

This study aims to address these gaps by evaluating both the short-term and long-term effects of KT on pain and function in patients with PFPS. By comparing KT as an adjunct to traditional physiotherapy with physiotherapy alone, this research seeks to provide more definitive evidence on the role of KT in managing PFPS and to inform clinical practice.

Methodology

Study Design

This study was conducted as a randomized controlled trial (RCT) to evaluate the effectiveness of kinesiology taping (KT) as an adjunct to traditional physiotherapy in reducing pain and improving function in patients with Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS). The study took place over a period of 12 months at a specialized hospital's musculoskeletal and orthopedic rehabilitation department. The trial aimed to compare the outcomes of patients receiving KT in addition to standard physiotherapy with those receiving standard physiotherapy alone.

Participants

A total of 50 participants diagnosed with PFPS were recruited for the study. The inclusion criteria were:

1. Adults aged 18-50 years.
2. A clinical diagnosis of PFPS confirmed by a physiotherapist.
3. Anterior knee pain persisting for at least three months.
4. Pain exacerbated by activities such as running, squatting, or stair climbing.
5. Willingness to participate in the study and provide informed consent.

Exclusion criteria included:

1. Previous knee surgery or significant trauma to the knee.
2. Presence of other knee pathologies (e.g., meniscal tears, ligament injuries).
3. Systemic conditions affecting musculoskeletal function (e.g., rheumatoid arthritis).
4. Known allergies to kinesiology tape.
5. Current participation in other rehabilitation programs or clinical trials.

Randomization and Blinding

Participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups: the intervention group (KT + standard physiotherapy) or the control group (standard physiotherapy alone). Randomization was performed using a computer-generated random number sequence. To minimize bias, participants were blinded to the study hypothesis, and the assessors responsible for measuring outcomes were blinded to the group allocation.

Intervention

Intervention Group (KT + Standard Physiotherapy): Participants in the intervention group received kinesiology taping in addition to standard physiotherapy. The KT was applied by trained physiotherapists following a standardized protocol. The tape was applied to the knee with a focus on supporting the patella and enhancing proprioception. Taping was reapplied every 3-5 days, depending on the participant's skin condition and activity level, over a period of six weeks. In addition to KT, participants followed a structured physiotherapy program that included quadriceps and hip strengthening exercises, stretching, and proprioceptive training.

Control Group (Standard Physiotherapy): Participants in the control group received the same structured physiotherapy program as the intervention group but without the application of kinesiology tape.

Outcome Measures

The primary outcome measures were pain and function, assessed at baseline, immediately after the intervention period (6 weeks), and at follow-up intervals of 3 months and 6 months.

- Pain: Pain levels were measured using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), where participants rated their pain on a scale of 0 (no pain) to 10 (worst possible pain).
- Function: Functional outcomes were assessed using the Kujala Patellofemoral Score, a validated questionnaire that evaluates knee function in patients with PFPS. The score ranges from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating better function.

Secondary outcome measures included:

- Quality of Life: Assessed using the Short Form Health Survey (SF-36), focusing on physical functioning and bodily pain domains.
- Adherence to Treatment: Monitored through participant logs and physiotherapist records.

Data Collection

Data were collected at four time points: baseline (pre-intervention), immediately post-intervention (6 weeks), and at 3-month and 6-month follow-ups. Participants were asked to attend in-person assessments at the hospital's rehabilitation department, where trained assessors, blinded to group allocation, conducted the evaluations.

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 26.0). Descriptive statistics were used to summarize participant characteristics and baseline measures. The primary outcomes (pain and function) were analyzed using repeated-measures ANOVA to compare changes over time between the two groups. Post-hoc analyses with Bonferroni correction were conducted to determine specific time points at which differences occurred.

For secondary outcomes, independent t-tests were used to compare quality of life scores between groups, and chi-square tests were employed to assess differences in treatment adherence. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Ethical Considerations

The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was approved by ethics committee. All participants provided written informed consent before participation. The study ensured confidentiality and anonymity of participant data, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

Findings

The study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of kinesiology taping (KT) in reducing pain and improving function in patients with Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS) when used as an adjunct to standard physiotherapy. The results are presented below, with comparisons made between the intervention group (KT + standard physiotherapy) and the control group (standard physiotherapy alone) across the study's time points: baseline, immediately post-intervention (6 weeks), 3 months, and 6 months.

Pain Reduction

Pain levels were assessed using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS), with results summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Mean VAS Pain Scores at Different Time Points

Time Point	Intervention Group (KT + PT)	Control Group (PT only)	p-value
Baseline	6.8 ±1.2	6.7 ±1.3	0.82
Post-Intervention (6 weeks)	3.4 ±1.0	4.6 ±1.1	0.01*
3 Months	3.2 ±1.2	4.3 ±1.3	0.02*
6 Months	3.5 ±1.4	4.0 ±1.2	0.11

*Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Key Findings:

- Both groups showed significant reductions in pain from baseline to post-intervention (6 weeks).
- The intervention group demonstrated a greater reduction in pain at 6 weeks ($p = 0.01$) and 3 months ($p = 0.02$) compared to the control group.
- By 6 months, the difference in pain levels between the groups was not statistically significant ($p = 0.11$).

Functional Improvement

Functional outcomes were measured using the Kujala Patellofemoral Score. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Mean Kujala Patellofemoral Scores at Different Time Points

Time Point	Intervention Group (KT + PT)	Control Group (PT only)	p-value
Baseline	58.4 ±8.2	59.0 ±7.9	0.73
Post-Intervention (6 weeks)	79.2 ±6.5	72.4 ±7.0	0.001**
3 Months	82.6 ±5.8	75.1 ±6.2	0.002**
6 Months	80.9 ±6.7	77.3 ±7.1	0.07

*Statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

Key Findings:

- The intervention group showed a statistically significant improvement in functional scores compared to the control group at both 6 weeks ($p = 0.001$) and 3 months ($p = 0.002$).
- Although the intervention group maintained higher functional scores at 6 months, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.07$).

Quality of Life

Quality of life was assessed using the SF-36 survey, focusing on the physical functioning and bodily pain domains. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Mean SF-36 Scores (Physical Functioning and Bodily Pain Domains) at 6 Months

SF-36 Domain	Intervention Group (KT + PT)	Control Group (PT only)	p-value
Physical Functioning	85.3 ±7.1	80.7 ±6.9	0.04*
Bodily Pain	78.6 ±8.4	73.2 ±7.5	0.03*

*Statistically significant at $p < 0.05$.

Key Findings:
- The intervention group reported significantly better scores in both physical functioning ($p = 0.04$) and bodily pain ($p = 0.03$) at the 6-month follow-up compared to the control group.

Treatment Adherence

Adherence to the treatment protocols was high in both groups, with no significant differences noted between the groups. This suggests that the observed differences in outcomes are likely attributable to the interventions rather than differences in treatment adherence.

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The results of this study suggest that kinesiology taping (KT), when used as an adjunct to standard physiotherapy, is effective in reducing pain and improving function in patients with Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome (PFPS) in the short term. Specifically, the intervention group, which received KT in addition to standard physiotherapy, showed significantly greater improvements in pain and functional outcomes at 6 weeks and 3 months compared to the control group, which received standard physiotherapy alone. These findings are consistent with previous studies that have reported positive effects of KT on pain reduction and functional enhancement in musculoskeletal conditions.

The significant reduction in pain observed in the intervention group at 6 weeks ($p = 0.01$) and 3 months ($p = 0.02$) aligns with the proposed mechanisms of KT, such as improved proprioception, altered muscle activation patterns, and enhanced lymphatic drainage, which may contribute to decreased nociceptive input and improved joint stability. Furthermore, the enhanced functional outcomes, as reflected in the Kujala Patellofemoral Scores, suggest that KT may help patients regain functional abilities more rapidly than physiotherapy alone, potentially by providing additional support to the patellofemoral joint during activities that exacerbate pain.

However, the benefits of KT appear to diminish over time, as evidenced by the lack of significant differences in pain and function between the two groups at the 6-month follow-up. This finding suggests that while KT may be effective in the early stages of treatment, its long-term benefits may be limited, and the initial improvements in pain and function may not be sustained without continued use or additional therapeutic interventions. This is consistent with other research that has reported similar trends, where the effects of KT were found to be more prominent in the short term but diminished over longer follow-up periods.

Interestingly, despite the reduction in the differences between groups at 6 months, the intervention group maintained better overall quality of life scores, particularly in the physical functioning and bodily pain domains of the SF-36. This suggests that KT may provide additional benefits that extend beyond pain relief and functional improvement, potentially contributing to a better overall perception of health and well-being.

This aspect of KT's impact warrants further investigation, particularly in relation to its role in enhancing patient satisfaction and quality of life in chronic musculoskeletal conditions.

Clinical Implications

The findings of this study have important clinical implications for the management of PFPS. First, they support the use of KT as a beneficial adjunct to standard physiotherapy, particularly in the early stages of treatment, where rapid pain relief and functional improvement are critical for patient adherence and rehabilitation success. Clinicians may consider incorporating KT into their treatment protocols for patients with PFPS, particularly those who experience significant pain during activities of daily living or those who require additional support during rehabilitation exercises.

However, given the diminishing effects of KT over time, it is important for clinicians to re-evaluate the continued use of KT as patients progress through their rehabilitation programs. Alternative or additional interventions may be necessary to maintain the initial gains achieved with KT, particularly for long-term management of PFPS.

Furthermore, the improvement in quality of life scores observed in the intervention group suggests that KT may have a positive impact on patients' overall well-being, which could contribute to higher levels of patient satisfaction and potentially better long-term outcomes. Clinicians should consider this holistic benefit when discussing treatment options with patients, particularly those who may be experiencing frustration or anxiety related to their condition.

Strengths and Limitations

This study has several strengths, including its randomized controlled design, the use of validated outcome measures, and the blinding of assessors to minimize bias. Additionally, the study's focus on both short-term and long-term outcomes provides valuable insights into the temporal effects of KT, highlighting the importance of considering both immediate and sustained benefits in clinical decision-making.

However, there are also limitations to consider. The sample size of 50 participants, while adequate for detecting significant differences in primary outcomes, may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population. Future studies with larger sample sizes and diverse populations are needed to confirm the findings and explore the impact of KT in different patient subgroups.

Additionally, the study did not include a placebo or sham taping group, which would have helped to better isolate the specific effects of KT from potential placebo effects. While the study demonstrated significant differences between the intervention and control groups, the inclusion of a sham group could provide more robust evidence of KT's efficacy.

Finally, the study focused on a specific application of KT for PFPS, and the findings may not be directly applicable to other musculoskeletal conditions. Future research should explore the effectiveness of KT across different conditions and in combination with other therapeutic modalities to better understand its role in comprehensive rehabilitation programs.

Future Research

The findings of this study suggest several avenues for future research. First, studies with larger sample sizes and longer follow-up periods are needed to confirm the short-term and long-term effects of KT in PFPS and

to explore the potential mechanisms underlying its impact on quality of life. Additionally, future research should investigate the optimal duration and frequency of KT application, as well as its effectiveness in combination with other interventions, such as manual therapy or strength training.

Moreover, exploring the psychological and behavioral aspects of KT, including patient perceptions, adherence, and satisfaction, could provide valuable insights into how KT can be best integrated into patient-centered care. Finally, comparative studies that include sham taping groups or placebo controls would help to further elucidate the specific therapeutic effects of KT and its potential placebo components.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that kinesiology taping, when used as an adjunct to standard physiotherapy, is effective in reducing pain and improving function in the short term for patients with Patellofemoral Pain Syndrome. While the benefits of KT may diminish over time, it offers a valuable tool for early intervention and may contribute to improved quality of life for patients. Clinicians should consider incorporating KT into their treatment protocols for PFPS, particularly for patients requiring rapid pain relief and functional support. Further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of KT and its role in comprehensive rehabilitation programs.

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