

Published: December 31, 2022

Citation: Ingala Martini L, Velasquez Garcia A, et al., 2022. Non-Operative Treatment Options in Primary Glenohumeral Osteoarthritis: A Comprehensive Review, Medical Research Archives, [online] 10(12).
<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v10i12.3410>

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DOI

<https://doi.org/10.18103/mra.v10i12.3410>

ISSN: 2375-1924

REVIEW ARTICLE

Non-Operative Treatment Options in Primary Glenohumeral Osteoarthritis: A Comprehensive Review

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ABSTRACT

Primary glenohumeral joint osteoarthritis is a growing pathology with multifactorial aetiology that affects younger and older population. Treatment must be focused on reducing pain, regaining functionality, and slowing the course of the disease. Surgery and non-operative methods are available for treating it and are a frequent source of controversy, the latter being applied to patients with factors that may relatively contraindicate surgery. Practitioners must be acquainted with the therapeutic choices and the current status of the evidence. Given that nonsurgical therapy may be beneficial in relieving symptoms, it should be considered first-line treatment, particularly in low-demand individuals with symptoms that have shown themselves sub acutely. Literature is lacking of high quality evidence on this matter, and up to date, there have not been any high quality studies comparing different options. Optimal treatment of primary glenohumeral osteoarthritis depends on specifically patient's needs, therefore a combination of all the resources available could represent the best option and result in better outcomes.

Introduction

Glenohumeral (GH) joint is the third most often afflicted major joint, and has been demonstrated, in cadaver and radiographic studies^{1,2}. Degenerative alterations in the glenohumeral joint are observed in up to 17% of shoulder pain sufferers, and a third of the patients over sixty years old^{3,4}, a patient population that has been growing in the last decades. It is a condition that can appear at any time, and practitioners must be acquainted with the therapeutic choices and the current status of the evidence.

The condition of osteoarthritis is complicated and multifactorial. Cartilage, subchondral bone, and synovium conditions plays crucial roles in its etiology⁵. Symptomatic primary glenohumeral joint osteoarthritis is a disorder that causes pain, limited range of motion, and progressive loss of shoulder function. It is distinguished by cartilage loss, adaptive changes to the subchondral bone, and the growth of inferior humeral head osteophytes. Biomechanical changes in the glenohumeral joint develop, joint space narrowing, and subsequent subluxation of the posterior humeral head, followed by progressive posterior glenoid bone may occur⁶. This progressive degeneration results in an abnormal distribution of loads in the GH joint and limits joint movement⁷. Pain and functional disability can have an impact both for physical and psychological well-being, limiting work and recreational activities in younger people and jeopardizing physical autonomy in the elderly⁸. It is usual for osteoarthritis to limit patients range of movement in less than 90 degrees. Some authors have reported 20% prevalence of idiopathic glenohumeral joint osteoarthritis in individuals over sixty years of age with shoulder pain².

Neer defined primary glenohumeral osteoarthritis (GH-OA) as shoulder movement restriction, loss of joint space, the existence of humeral head osteophytes, and the lack of rotator cuff tear. It is still essential to distinguish GH-OA from rotator cuff arthropathy⁹. When there are no risk factors that potentially contribute to joint dysfunction, primary OA is diagnosed. Chronic dislocations and recurring instability, trauma, surgery, avascular necrosis, inflammatory arthropathy, and severe rotator cuff tears can all lead to secondary OA¹⁰. Primary GH-OA pain is frequently located posteriorly and deep inside the joint. It is usually accompanied with nighttime discomfort, stiffness, and functional restrictions¹¹.

Treatment for GH- OA is frequently contentious and involves both nonoperative and surgical options¹². Reducing pain, recovering function, and limiting disease progression are the main goals for GH-OA treatment, a non-operative management approach should be adopted before considering other¹³⁻¹⁵. Non-invasive techniques should be considered first, especially in individuals with mild-to-moderate OA or when pain and functional impairments are minor despite more advanced radiographic abnormalities. Lifestyle and occupational adjustments are frequently the first steps in this process. Almost all individuals with shoulder OA can benefit from anti-inflammatory medications and physical treatment. Therapy should ideally begin before the onset of atrophy or contracture and should be customized to the patient's unique needs^{12,13}. If conservative measures fail, surgical intervention should be considered.

Nonsurgical options are the backbone of treatment for primary glenohumeral osteoarthritis. Given that nonsurgical therapy may be beneficial in alleviating symptoms, it should be considered first-line treatment, particularly in low-demand individuals with symptoms that have shown subacutely¹⁶. It may also be the preferred treatment for people who are not surgical candidates due to medical conditions.¹²

Intra-articular injectable options

Despite nonsurgical therapy of shoulder OA does not prevent disease progression, it can be useful in minimizing discomfort and improving range of motion¹⁷. For people who do not respond to anti-inflammatory drugs and have persistent pain, intra-articular administration can be performed. The functions of corticosteroids, hyaluronic acid, and autologous blood-derived anti-inflammatory substances, for which there are numerous formulations and methods of preparation, respectively, are of particular importance.¹⁸

Blaine et al. in a Randomized Control Trial (RCT), assessed 660 individuals with glenohumeral OA and discovered a threefold reduction in pain in the HA group compared to the placebo group, at 26 weeks.¹⁹ Another RCT also studied the efficacy of intra-articular administered HA compared to a placebo control group in 300 patients with chronic shoulder pain associated with GH-OA. Improvement in the Visual Analogue Scale (VAS) for pain between baseline and 7, 13, 20 and 26 weeks of follow-up favored patients treated with HA. Similar

results were observed using the OMERACT-Osteoarthritis Research Society International (OARSI) that showed a significant difference in favor of the HA treated patients²⁰ Other prospective case series with significant differences between intervals, dose administration, and follow-ups, show moderate evidence supporting the use of HA in primary GH-OA.^{16,21-24} A significant number of systematic reviews and meta-analysis evaluating the efficacy of intra-articular HA treatment in patients with primary GH-OA report similar results with small to moderate treatment effects compared to placebo, although well tolerated and with similar adverse effects to those observed in the hip and knee joint.²⁵ A significant number of systematic reviews and meta-analysis evaluating the efficacy of intra-articular HA treatment in patients with primary GH-OA report similar results with small to moderate treatment effects compared to placebo, although well tolerated and with similar adverse effects to those observed in the hip and knee joint.²⁵

One of the most popular conservative therapy options for symptomatic glenohumeral OA is intra-articular glenohumeral corticosteroid injection, however there is little evidence in the currently available literature on its effectiveness.^{25,26} Merolla et al. compared intra-articular methylprednisolone to Hylan G-F 20 and discovered that while both groups significantly reduced pain at one month, only the hyaluronic acid group continued to experience pain alleviation after six months.²⁷

According to research conducted by Kimetal, 3-8 years after receiving intra-articular glenohumeral corticosteroid injection for primary glenohumeral OA, 37.3% of shoulders underwent shoulder arthroplasty. About 42% of patients underwent further surgery when the proportion of shoulders that underwent a surgical treatment other than an arthroplasty (4.5%) was taken into account.²⁸ In a prospective study for assessing the efficacy of a single image-guided corticosteroid injection in the conservative management of GHOA, twenty nine shoulders received an image guided intra-articular corticosteroid injection, resulting in clinically significant improvements in shoulder function up to 4 months post-injection with dwindling effects thereafter, and statistically and clinically significant improvements in their pain (VAS) for up to a year.²⁹

There are not many clinical studies that evaluate PRP injections to treat GH osteoarthritis and tend to

be case studies. A randomized trial including 70 patients compared the efficacy of ultrasound-guided hyaluronic acid (HA) versus leukocyte-poor platelet-rich plasma (LP-PRP) injection in the treatment of glenohumeral osteoarthritis, and revealed substantial reductions for both groups in pain levels at 1 and 2 months. Hyaluronic acid and a single injection of leukocyte-poor PRP were shown to have comparable effects³⁰. PRP treatment has several issues that haven't been fully solved. The majority of PRP clinical research fall short in reporting crucial scientific information that is essential to the result. Leukocyte concentration and preparation methods can vary often.^{31,32} Bone marrow derived and adipose derived cell therapies intra-articular injections represent a relatively new option. Although the mechanisms by which these might regulate inflammatory processes are not yet fully understood, they have been proven to be mostly harmless with minimal adverse effects. Centeno et al, in 34 individuals with glenohumeral OA, demonstrated an improvement in pain and function using BMAC (bone marrow aspirate concentrate stem cells)³³.

All around there has been debate in literature regarding different approaches for glenohumeral intra-articular injection, also the lack of image-guided injections in many of these studies is of particular concern, as previous studies have concluded that image-guided corticosteroid injections are more accurate than blind injections, and they may provide longer symptomatic relief in patients with shoulder pathology.^{29,34,35}

In specimens of 80 shoulders, Patel et al. compared the accuracy of the blinded procedure with the posterior ultrasound (US) guided approach to the glenohumeral joint. When US guidance was used instead of blind administration, the accuracy rate was much greater (92.5% vs. 72.5%).³⁶ Rijs, in a prospective trial recommend using the new anterior approach for intra-articular glenohumeral injections instead of ultrasound-guided injections because it will save time and costs associated with ultrasound.³⁷ However, there is no strong evidence to support the use of intra-articular injections for primary GH-OA. Guidelines have not encouraged or discouraged the use of injectable corticosteroids or pharmaceuticals, which have instead made a "restricted" recommendation about the use of injectable viscosupplementation.⁶

Physical therapy in primary GH-OA

Physical therapy is frequently used in a multidisciplinary context for nonsurgical treatment regimen and there have been no studies that have looked at the effectiveness of physical therapy as a standalone treatment. Intensity or duration of therapy is not established. It has been recommended that a cognitive approach combined with supervised physical exercise be used. Patients should be informed about the arthritic process and overall prognosis, rather than focusing on the pathoanatomy of glenohumeral osteoarthritis³⁸. Education should also involve activity modification, such as reducing loading and repeated motion over the head and in other provoking situations. After 3 years of follow-up in a study of 129 patients aged 65 years and older, Guo et al. reported improvements in pain and function as part of a multimodal treatment approach³⁹.

Lifestyle changes may help in the management of glenohumeral osteoarthritis. General recommendations for people with glenohumeral osteoarthritis include good sleep hygiene, quitting smoking, and regular exercise⁴⁰. According to Millet et al, the first care of shoulder discomfort should include a trial of rest, activity adjustment, patient education, physical therapy for mobility, and strengthening exercises, because these modalities are affordable, carry little risk, and may alleviate patient complaints.¹¹

The specific exercise prescription for glenohumeral osteoarthritis is not well established in the literature. According to Saltzman et al., research on physical treatment for glenohumeral osteoarthritis is limited and, in some cases, strengthening activities can increase symptoms¹⁴. The recommended physical therapy modalities include periscapular and shoulder strengthening, stretching, distraction/manual therapy, and range of motion¹⁴. Enhancing mobility and elasticity is the first objective, and once pain has decreased, strengthening exercises should be started with graded resistance training, depending on tolerance of the deltoid and shoulder girdle and scapular balance, as well as aerobic exercises³⁸. Patients with GH-OA should be encouraged to incorporate exercise into their lifestyle. The programs proven to benefit patients last at least 12 weeks⁴¹. Strengthening the contralateral upper extremity has been shown to increase afflicted limb strength by 9.4% in acute stages where movement may not be tolerated⁴².

Regarding the use of physical agents for the treatment of GH-OA, these are mostly used for symptomatology control. No superiority between the use of superficial or deep heat, electrotherapy, or phototherapy; therefore, they should be used as an adjuvant as inflammatory process reducers and pain management²⁶. The physical therapy intervention and patient care should also take into account the inflammatory process associated with glenohumeral osteoarthritis, and an impairment-based approach should be used to target particular patient deficits⁴³. Additionally, considering localized discomfort outside the shoulder may be useful in lowering overall symptoms.

Pharmacological treatment for GH-OA

Multimodal approach should be the cornerstone in conservative treatment of primary glenohumeral osteoarthritis. Managing pain and discomfort represents the main target, therefore, functionality and quality of life can be totally or partially restored. Pharmacological agents can be an important part of the equation, and most of the times, a necessary, and reliable tool. However, there is a lack of literature related to the use of oral agents in specifically primary glenohumeral osteoarthritis, and most of the majority of trials are focused on hip, knee and hand osteoarthritis.

Since the last century, salicylates, acetaminophen, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medications have been useful in relieving pain and inflammation in arthritic patients¹². Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory medicines (NSAIDs) used orally can alleviate musculoskeletal pain but raise the risk of gastrointestinal, cardiovascular, and renal side effects⁴⁴. The safety of all NSAIDs is a concern, particularly in the elderly, and patients who allegedly decide to opt out for surgical treatment, and those with multisystemic illnesses and those at increased risk of cardiovascular and renal side effects. The risk of adverse effects associated with NSAIDs appears to depend on the dosage. Long-term effects have insufficient evidence. A solution to this matter could be the use of COX-2 inhibitors, but have not been shown to be more efficacious⁴⁵.

50-67% of patients can expect shoulder pain relief with the use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs¹¹. Improvement has been reported with the use of oral prednisolone has been reported⁴⁶. According to a network meta-analysis (76 randomized controlled trials, 58 451 individuals), NSAIDs relieve osteoarthritis pain somewhat more than placebo after 12 weeks. Higher daily doses of diclofenac (150 mg)

naproxen (1000 mg) ibuprofen (2400 mg) and etoricoxib (60 mg) have more significant benefits (>10 points on a 0-100 scale)⁴⁷.

Topical NSAIDs have been reported superior to placebo in the treatment of osteoarthritis, with less side effects than oral versions⁴⁸. Opioids do not give more pain relief than NSAIDs for musculoskeletal pain and might have major side effects such as addiction⁴⁴. Chondroprotective drugs, such as chondroitin and glucosamine sulfate, may play a role in the non-operative care of arthrosis in addition to routine medical management. Despite this fact, there are no peer-reviewed studies on the efficacy of these drugs¹².

Evidence-based approach in primary GH-OA treatment.

From an evidence-based standpoint, physical therapy and educational lifestyle modifications seem to bring the best results, although it has not been demonstrated^{11, 38, 40}. When compared to other methods such as intra-articular injections and/or pharmacological therapies, exercise and educational-based lifestyle changes, even prescribed alone, give the presumption to produce better outcomes specially in pain tolerance and patient-perception of limited functionality and also seem to be cost-effective⁴⁹. Literature is lacking of

high quality evidence on this matter, and up to date, there have not been any high quality studies comparing these. Optimal treatment of primary GH-OA can be tricky, and depends on specifically patient's needs, therefore a combination of all the resources available could represent the best option and result in better outcomes.

Conclusions

Primary glenohumeral osteoarthritis is a multifactorial and challenging pathology, that can be hard to diagnose and treat. Even surgical treatment on many occasions cannot be avoided. There are nonsurgical options that can be applied to patients with factors that may relatively contraindicate surgery. We believe that there are effective nonsurgical treatments for the management of this pathology. However, the authors recommend the combination, if possible, of all the measures mentioned for the optimal management of this pathology.

Conflicts of interest

None of the authors have any conflicts of interest or financial ties to disclose.

Acknowledgements

None of the authors have any to declare.

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