Risk Factors for Lateral Ankle Sprains and Chronic Ankle Instability

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Lateral ankle sprains are a common injury sustained by individuals who participate in recreational physical activities and sports. After a lateral ankle sprain, a large proportion of individuals develop long-term symptoms, which contribute to the development of chronic ankle instability (CAI). Due to the prevalence of lateral ankle sprains and the propensity to develop CAI, collective efforts toward reducing the risk of sustaining these injuries should be a priority of the sports medicine and sports physiotherapy communities. The comprehensive injury-causation model was developed to illustrate the interaction of

internal and external risk factors in the occurrence of the inciting injury. The ability to mitigate injury risk is contingent on a comprehensive understanding of risk factors for injury. The objective of this current concepts review is to use the comprehensive injury-causation model as a framework to illustrate the risk factors for lateral ankle sprain and CAI based on the literature.

Key Words: sports, athletic injuries, sprains and strains, lower extremity, ankle

ateral ankle sprains are the lower limb musculo-skeletal injuries most frequently incurred by individuals who participate in recreational physical activities and sports, as well as by the general public.\(^1\) These injuries can have serious consequences for the injured individual in terms of treatment costs and time lost from work or sport.\(^1\) This injury can be compounded by the high propensity to develop long-term symptoms, which contribute to chronic ankle instability (CAI).\(^1\)

Musculoskeletal injury can negatively affect an individual's ability to participate in physical activity and may trigger long-term sequelae such as early-onset posttraumatic osteoarthritis.² This is concerning as lateral ankle sprains are especially prevalent in adolescent and young adult populations.^{3,4} As such, efforts to reduce the risk of incurring lateral ankle sprains should be a priority among the sports medicine and sports physiotherapy communities.

The ability to target and improve injury risk-reduction programs may be limited by an incomplete understanding of the causes of injuries. To this end, Bahr and Krosshaug⁵ developed a comprehensive injury-causation model. It outlines the interaction of internal and external risk factors in the occurrence of the inciting injury; it is based on the epidemiologic model of injury developed by Meeuwisse⁶ and the biomechanical model of injury proposed by McIntosh.⁷ The Meeuwisse⁶ epidemiologic model of injury attempts to account for the interaction of intrinsic risk factors (which predispose an athlete to injury) and extrinsic risk factors for injury, which together render an athlete susceptible to injury, before an injury-inciting event occurs. According to this model, each athlete has his or her own set of intrinsic risk factors that heighten the risk of sustaining an injury (ie, the predisposed athlete). The predisposed athlete becomes a susceptible athlete when exposed to

extrinsic risk factors, which further heighten the risk of sustaining an injury. The McIntosh⁷ biomechanical model of injury causation endeavors to account for additional factors that may influence the interplay between tissue load and tissue-load tolerance and, hence, injury risk. These factors include the athlete's behaviors and attitudes, training status, athlete skill level, equipment, coaching, other competitors, and the external environment. The comprehensive injury-causation model developed by Bahr and Krosshaug⁵ furthers these models by highlighting the importance of injury mechanisms. Detailing the activities during which injuries occur (eg, landing from a jump), the interaction between opposing players (eg, contact mechanisms of injury in team sports), and the biomechanics of the injury event (eg, inversion and internal rotation of the foot and ankle, resulting in injury to the lateral ligaments of the ankle joint) can provide useful information.

The purpose of our current concepts review was to use the comprehensive injury-causation model as a framework to illustrate the risk factors for lateral ankle sprain and CAI based on the published literature. For this article, *lateral ankle sprain* is considered "an acute traumatic injury to the lateral ligament complex of the ankle joint as a result of excessive inversion of the rear foot or a combined plantar flexion and adduction of the foot." Additionally, *CAI* is considered:

... an encompassing term used to classify a subject with both mechanical and functional instability of the ankle joint. To be classified as having chronic ankle instability, residual symptoms ("giving way" and feelings of ankle joint instability) should be present for a minimum of 1 year postinitial sprain.^{8(p2117)}

LATERAL ANKLE SPRAINS

Intrinsic Risk Factors

Age. Among the general public, the ankle-sprain injury incidence rate is influenced by age.

Using emergency department data from 4 urban health districts in the United Kingdom, Bridgman et al³ reported that the highest ankle-sprain incidence rate was observed among females between 10 and 14 years of age (12.8 per 1000 person-years), while the peak ankle-sprain injury incidence rate for males occurred between the ages of 15 and 19 years. Similar observations have been reported in the United States: using data from the National Electronic Injury Surveillance System, Waterman et al⁴ calculated an ankle-sprain incidence rate of 2.15 per 1000 person-years. The highest incidence rate of ankle sprain was incurred by those between 15 and 19 years old, with an estimated injury incidence rate of 7.2 per 1000 person-years. Interestingly, individuals between 10 and 24 years of age sustained more than half of all ankle sprains. The peak incidence rate of ankle sprain among females occurred between the ages of 10 and 14 years (5.4 per 1000 personyears), whereas the peak incidence rate in males occurred between the ages of 15 and 19 years (8.9 per 1000 personyears). These data are also supported by the authors of a recent meta-analysis,9 who reported that children had a higher ankle-sprain incidence rate than adolescents and adults.

Additionally, Pourkazemi et al¹⁰ recently observed that younger age (<24 years old; odds ratio [OR] = 8.41, 95% confidence interval [CI] = 1.48, 47.96) was an independent predictor of recurrent ankle sprain after first-time ankle sprain. Interventions to reduce the risk of ankle sprain should be targeted at preadolescents and early adolescents.

Sex. Among the general population, the incidence rate of ankle sprains does not appear to be influenced by sex. Waterman et al⁴ demonstrated that males and females had ankle-sprain incidence rates of 2.20 and 2.10 per 1000 person-years, respectively, equating to an incidence rate ratio of 1.04.

Among sporting populations, no sex differences were noted in ankle-sprain incidence rates. Beynnon et al¹¹ found that the incidence rate of first-time inversion ankle sprain did not differ between male (0.78 per 1000 person-days) and female (1.15 per 1000 person-days) collegiate athletes. The results were similar among high school athletes (male = 0.78 per 1000 person-days, female = 0.90 per 1000 person-days). The observation of no sex differences in the ankle-sprain incidence rate was supported by a recent epidemiologic study¹² of 25 National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) sports. In sex-comparable sports (baseball/softball, basketball, cross-country, hockey, ice soccer, indoor track, lacrosse, outdoor track, swimming and diving, and tennis), the overall rate of lateral ankle sprains did not differ (relative risk = 0.95, 95% CI = 0.86, 1.05).

Considering the substantial ankle-sprain incidence rate among both male and female high school and collegiate athletes, players of both sexes should be exposed to risk-reduction interventions.

Body Composition. The risk of sustaining an ankle sprain is influenced by body composition. Fousekis et al¹³ assessed 100 professional soccer players during the

preseason to determine potential risk factors for noncontact ankle sprains. Both body mass (OR = 8.16, 95% CI = 1.42, 46.63) and body mass index (BMI; OR = 5.72, 95% CI = 1.37, 23.95) were independent predictors of noncontact ankle sprains.

Tyler et al¹⁴ noted that BMI was a significant risk factor for ankle sprain in high school American football players. They reported ankle-sprain incidence rates (per 1000 exposures) of 0.52 (95% CI = 0.1, 1.6) for players with a normal BMI, 1.05 (95% CI = 0.3, 2.5) for players at risk of being overweight, and 2.03 (95% CI = 0.8, 4.2) for overweight players. Gribble et al¹⁵ reported findings similar to those of Tyler et al¹⁴: body mass index (BMI) was a significant independent predictor of lateral ankle sprain among high school and collegiate American football players. The average BMI for football players who sustained a lateral ankle sprain was $29.32 \pm 6.08 \text{ kg/m}^2$. This was different than the average BMI of players who did not sustain a lateral ankle sprain $(26.70 \pm 4.64 \text{ kg/m}^2)$; the associated effect size was moderate.

A player's body composition is an important risk factor for ankle sprain. Emphasis should be placed on ensuring that soccer and American football players have and maintain the appropriate body composition for the unique positional demands of their sports.

Health: History of Previous Injury. In a prospective study of intrinsic risk factors for ankle sprain among active university students, de Noronha et al¹⁶ showed that participants with a history of ankle sprain were twice as likely to incur a subsequent sprain (hazard ratio = 2.21, 95% CI = 1.07, 4.57). In a study of risk factors for noncontact ankle sprains among high school American football players, Tyler et al¹⁴ observed that the ankle-sprain incidence rate was higher in athletes with previous ankle injuries (2.60 per 1000 exposures versus 0.39 per 1000 exposures). Twenty six percent of the players with a history of ankle sprain incurred a subsequent ankle sprain during the study. In contrast, only 11% of those players without a history of ankle sprain incurred an ankle sprain during the study

Ankle sprains had one of the highest reinjury rates of all lower limb musculoskeletal injuries, with up to a 2-fold increased risk of reinjury in the year after injury. The More recently, Doherty et al reported that up to 40% of individuals who sustained an initial lateral ankle sprain developed CAI within the 12 months after the injury. Additionally, Pourkazemi et al found that a recent first-time ankle sprain (OR = 8.23, 95% CI = 1.66, 40.72) was an independent predictor of recurrent ankle sprain.

A history of ankle sprain is a primary risk factor for recurrent injury. Individuals with a history of lateral ankle sprain and who participate in physical activities and sports with a high prevalence of ankle sprains should pursue specific, targeted, and ongoing exercise-based injury risk-reduction programs. Furthermore, clinicians should consider recommending ankle-joint braces, as strong evidence supports the use of such braces to reduce the risk of ankle sprains among high school athletes (football¹⁹and basketball²⁰) with a history of ankle sprain.

Physical Fitness: Muscle Strength. Inadequate strength of the ankle- and hip-joint muscles may heighten the risk of sustaining an ankle sprain. Fousekis et al¹³ reported that eccentric isokinetic strength asymmetries in the ankle-joint

dorsiflexors and plantar flexors were independent risk factors for noncontact ankle sprains among soccer players. Specifically, soccer players with preseason eccentric strength asymmetries (>15%) in the ankle joint had 8.8 times the odds of sustaining a noncontact ankle sprain when compared with players who had no eccentric strength asymmetry.

In an investigation of hip strength as an intrinsic risk factor for lateral ankle sprains among youth soccer players, De Ridder et al²¹ noted that reduced hip-extension strength was an independent risk factor. Specifically, players with greater hip-extension muscle strength had lower hazards of sustaining a lateral ankle sprain (hazard ratio = 0.3, 95% CI = 0.1, 0.9).

Specific strengthening exercises for the hip and ankle muscles may help to mitigate the risk of soccer players incurring a lateral ankle sprain.

Skill Level: Postural Balance. Impairments in postural balance increase the risk of sustaining a lateral ankle sprain. Trojian and McKeag²² found an association between preseason performance on a single-legged balance test and ankle sprains sustained throughout the season. The relative risk of sustaining an ankle sprain was 2.43 (95% CI = 1.15, 5.14) among participants with a positive singlelegged balance test. The single-legged balance test that they describe could be easily implemented in a clinical setting and does not necessitate any instrumented equipment. The test required the patient to stand on the test limb (without shoes), with the contralateral knee bent and not touching the test limb; the hips were in the same horizontal plane. With eyes open, the patient fixed his or her gaze on a spot marked on a wall and then closed the eyes for 10 seconds. A positive test was defined by any of the following: the patient reported a sense of instability, touching of the lower limbs, movement of the test foot on the floor, or touching down of the nontest limb.

Gribble et al15 sought to identify clinically oriented outcome measures that predicted lateral ankle sprains among high school and collegiate American football players. Those players who sustained lateral ankle sprains had lower reach-distance scores (65.57% ± 7.90% versus $69.72\% \pm 7.53\%$; all scores were normalized as a percentage of leg length) in the anterior-reach direction of the Star Excursion Balance Test when compared with those players who did not sustain a lateral ankle sprain. Recently, Attenborough et al²³ also reported that impaired dynamic postural balance as assessed via performance on the Star Excursion Balance Test was a risk factor for ankle sprains among netball players. A preseason reach-distance score in the posterior-medial direction \leq 77.5% of leg length was associated with a heightened risk of ankle sprain (OR = 4.04, 95% CI = 1.00, 16.35).

Impairments in both static and dynamic postural balance are risk factors for lateral ankle sprain. Athletes who participate in sports with a high prevalence of lateral ankle sprains should perform postural-balance exercises on a regular basis.

Joint Anatomy and Psychological Factors

Joint anatomy and psychological factors (eg, competitiveness, motivation, perception of risk) are included as internal or intrinsic risk factors for injury in the

comprehensive injury-causation model.⁵ However, relative to lateral ankle sprain, few articles have been published in these areas. As such, future research is warranted.

Extrinsic Risk Factors

Participation in certain sports is associated with a higher risk of sustaining a lateral ankle sprain. Doherty et al⁹ showed that indoor and court sports had the highest lateral ankle-sprain incidence rates. The NCAA Injury Surveillance System has captured injury data across collegiate sports over the past 27 years in the United States. Using this database, Hootman et al²⁴ demonstrated that ankle sprains were the most common injury in NCAA sports, accounting for 15% of all reported injuries, with an overall incidence of 0.83 sprains per 1000 athlete-exposures.

Roos et al¹² determined that the NCAA sports in which lateral ankle sprains contributed the largest proportions of injuries were men's basketball (15.0%), women's basketball (14.5%), women's volleyball (10.7%), and women's lacrosse (10.2%). Additionally, lateral ankle sprain was the most common injury diagnosis in 12 sports and in the top 5 for an additional 9 sports. The sports with the highest rates of lateral ankle sprain were men's basketball (11.96 per 10 000 athlete-exposures), women's basketball (9.50 per 10 000 athlete-exposures), and women's soccer (8.36 per 10 000 athlete-exposures).

Athletes who participate in court sports are at a heightened risk of sustaining a lateral ankle sprain. These athletes should participate in an ongoing exercise-based injury risk-reduction program, and clinicians should consider recommending ankle-joint braces to reduce the risk of ankle sprains among high school athletes^{19,20} with or without a history of ankle sprain.

Inciting Event

Lateral ankle sprains typically occur during the transition from nonweight bearing to weight bearing. Numerous researchers have detailed the kinematics associated with lateral ankle sprains.^{25–30} In all instances, the characteristic biomechanical features were a rapid increase in inversion and internal rotation with or without plantar flexion. Thus, lateral ankle sprains appear to occur as a consequence of a sudden rapid inversion and internal-rotation loading of the foot-ankle complex, irrespective of sagittal-plane position.

Fong et al³⁰ described the kinematic characteristics of lateral ankle sprains recorded during 5 televised tennis matches by using a model-based image-matching process. Interestingly, in all cases, the ankle joint was inverted at the time of initial contact, which is a vulnerable position and theorized as an inciting mechanism of lateral ankle sprains.³¹ Moreover, peak inversion occurred rapidly after initial contact (typically 0.09–0.13 seconds).

An inverted position of the ankle joint at initial contact is a particularly vulnerable position and has been identified as a key characteristic feature of the lateral ankle-sprain injury mechanism. Exercises that challenge the control of frontal and transverse foot-ankle motion should be incorporated into exercise-based injury risk-reduction programs. Furthermore, ankle-joint braces can provide extra mechanical stability to the ankle joint and reduced the risk of ankle-

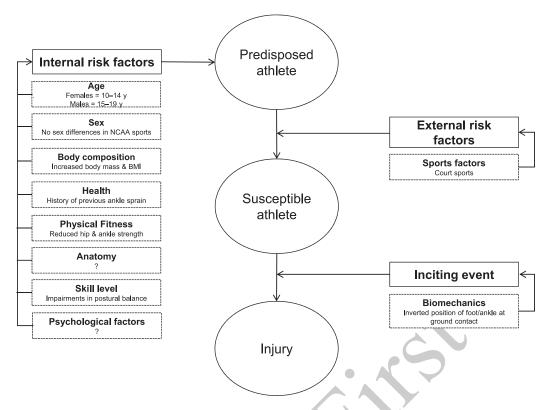


Figure. Established intrinsic and extrinsic risk factors for lateral ankle sprain. Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index; NCAA, National Collegiate Athletic Association.

joint injuries among high school football¹⁹ and basketball²⁰ athletes. Hence, they should be considered a prophylactic intervention for athletes participating in sports with a high prevalence of ankle-joint injuries.

COMPREHENSIVE INJURY CAUSATION MODEL: LATERAL ANKLE SPRAIN

We have summarized the interactions of established intrinsic and extrinsic risk factors for lateral ankle sprain injury in the Figure. These are presented in line with the comprehensive injury-causation model proposed by Bahr and Krosshaug.⁵ The complex interaction of internal or intrinsic risk factors such as age, sex, body composition, health (a history of ankle joint injury), physical fitness (muscle strength, anatomy), skill level (postural balance), and psychological factors predisposes an athlete to the risk of injury. The predisposed athlete becomes a susceptible athlete once exposed to extrinsic risk factors, which further heighten the risk of injury. Regarding the internal or intrinsic risk factors for lateral ankle sprains, the largest volume of supporting evidence relates to age and health: a history of ankle joint injury. Regarding external risk factors for lateral ankle sprains, athletes who participate in court and field sports have the highest risk. Knowledge of these risk factors can guide clinicians toward an efficient use of resources. For example, it would be prudent to implement a risk-reduction intervention for a young adolescent basketball player with a history of lateral ankle sprain. If the clinician intended to introduce an exercise-based injury risk-reduction program, it would be necessary to also evaluate the athlete's body composition, physical health

(muscle strength) and skill level (postural balance). To further mitigate the injury risk and provide external mechanical stability to the ankle joint, the clinician could recommend the athlete use an ankle-joint brace during practices and matches.

CHRONIC ANKLE INSTABILITY

To our knowledge, few prospective studies have been published that identified risk factors for the development of CAI. Rather, much of the literature in the area has focused on identifying variables that differentiate individuals with CAI from uninjured individuals or lateral ankle-sprain copers.³²

Doherty et al³³ conducted a prospective cohort study of the natural recovery from a first-ever lateral ankle sprain with the objective of identifying factors that contributed to the development of CAI. At 1-year follow up, 40% of their cohort had CAI. Being unable to perform a drop landing and a drop vertical jump within 2 weeks of initial injury was associated with the development of CAI; the associated positive likelihood ratio was 1.81. This resulted in a 50% posttest probability of developing CAI. Additionally, poorer dynamic postural balance and a lower level of self-reported function 6 months after initial injury were associated with CAI; the associated positive likelihood ratio was 8.33. This resulted in a posttest probability >80% for developing CAI.

More recently, Pourkazemi et al¹⁰ reported that a first-time ankle sprain (OR = 8.23, 95% CI = 1.66, 40.72) and younger age (OR = 8.41, 95% CI = 1.48, 47.96) were both independent predictors of recurrent ankle sprain.

COMPREHENSIVE INJURY-CAUSATION MODEL: CAI

Due to the limited amount of research on risk factors for the development of recurrent ankle sprain and CAI, it is not possible to present a summary graphic in line with the comprehensive injury-causation model proposed by Bahr and Krosshaug.⁵

CONCLUSIONS

Our purpose for this current concepts review was to use the comprehensive injury-causation model to illustrate the risk factors for lateral ankle sprain and CAI. This was achieved for lateral ankle sprain, as a number of independent risk factors have been established. Knowledge of these will allow clinicians to implement appropriate risk-reduction interventions. More methodologically rigorous prospective cohort studies are required to establish risk factors for the development of CAI.

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