Improvement of active calf muscle extensibility by means of radial shock waves in chronic achillodynia

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Summary: The aim of this study was to investigate the possibility of improving active calf muscle extensibility by means of radial shock waves (rESWT) in patients with chronic achillodynia. To this end, radial shock waves were applied to the shortened calf muscles in 102 patients, and active dorsal extension of the affected ankle joint was measured before and after completion of therapy and 3 to 6 months later. The results of the study showed a lasting improvement in active dorsal extension by 9 degrees after 4.4 therapy sessions with 4000 to 6000 shock waves per session. The mode of action of radial shock waves in muscles is consistent with the trigger point theory, but needs to be investigated in more detail by experimental studies.

Key words: rESWT, calf muscle shortening, stretching, muscle extensibility, achillodynia, trigger points.

Introduction: Shortened calf muscles are one of the main risk factors for recurrent achillodynia (McCRORY 1999, KAUFMAN 1999, KRIVICKAS 1997). The anamnestic information provided by patients revealed that many subjects had been suffering from limited mobility for several years (e.g. heel up off the ground when in squat position). The real cause of this muscle shortening is often difficult to identify. In most cases, stretching exercises are not sufficient to provide pain relief and produce a lasting improvement in calf muscle extensibility (ALFREDSON H 2000, HARVEY L 2002, YOUDAS JW 2003). By contrast, the use of heel lifts leads to a rapid improvement of the condition, which demonstrates that the reduction of tension on the Achilles tendon is crucial in curing achillodynia (DAVIS WL 1999). A possible cause of calf muscle shortening may be the presence of trigger points in the calf muscles (TRAVELL JG 1992). The permanent contracture of the actin-myosin filaments caused by trigger points due to the energy crisis of the motor end-plate leads to circumscribed muscle contractures which, in the presence of a sufficient number of trigger points, result in a measurable overall shortening of the affected muscles and in a limited dorsal extension of the ankle joint. The causes of trigger point formation are manifold and range from mechanical overstrain, trauma or poor posture to articular, neurogenic or remote muscular disorders (satellite trigger points).

One of the most effective therapies in use today is the application of strong mechanical pressure to the trigger points. This is generally done by using the friction massage technique, followed by calf muscle stretching. The following reasons for the effectiveness of this treatment method are discussed: resolution of existing permanent actin-myosin contractures and improvement in local circulation along with the elimination of the ischemia-induced energy crisis (MENSE S 2001). Examinations into the effectiveness of classical trigger point therapy in improving calf muscle

extensibility are not dealt with in the citable literature. The effectiveness of calf muscle stretching alone is discussed controversially (ALFREDSON H 2000, PORTER D 2002, YOUDAS JW 2003), as this therapy approach is considered to induce only a temporary improvement in mobility (HARVEY L 2002).

In the last few years, the use of low to medium-energy radial shock waves (rESWT) has become increasingly established in the treatment of tendon pathologies. This therapy method uses shock waves at an energy level of up to 0.23 mJ/mm² and a maximum tissue penetration depth of 35 mm. On the basis of the aforementioned pressure application theory in the treatment of trigger points, the question is whether shock waves are able to provide a lasting improvement in the extensibility of shortened calf muscles.

Materials and methods: A retrospective study was conducted on 102 orthopedic practice patients (63 males, 39 females, average age 45.3 years) with unilateral chronic achillodynia (> 6 months) and a history of failed conservative therapy. The inclusion criterion was a soft tissue induced reduction in the active dorsal extension of the ankle joint to less than 20° when examined at 90° knee flexion.

In addition to receiving local Achilles tendon treatment, all patients in the study underwent 4 to 6 radial shock wave therapy sessions at weekly intervals. During each session, 4000 to 6000 radial shock waves were applied to the calf using the Masterpuls MP100 system developed by Storz (Fig. 1) with 15 mm D-Actor shock transmitter. Shock waves were primarily applied to the proximal gastrocnemius muscles where most palpable indurations were found and, by using the smoothing technique, towards the distal end of the muscles. The median part of the soleus muscle had to be treated through the proximal Achilles tendon, whereas the distal lateral muscle portion was freely accessible for shock wave application. The maximum application pressure was determined by the patient's pain threshold and was increased from 2.5 to 4.0 bar during the therapy. Shock waves were applied at a shock frequency of 15 Hz.

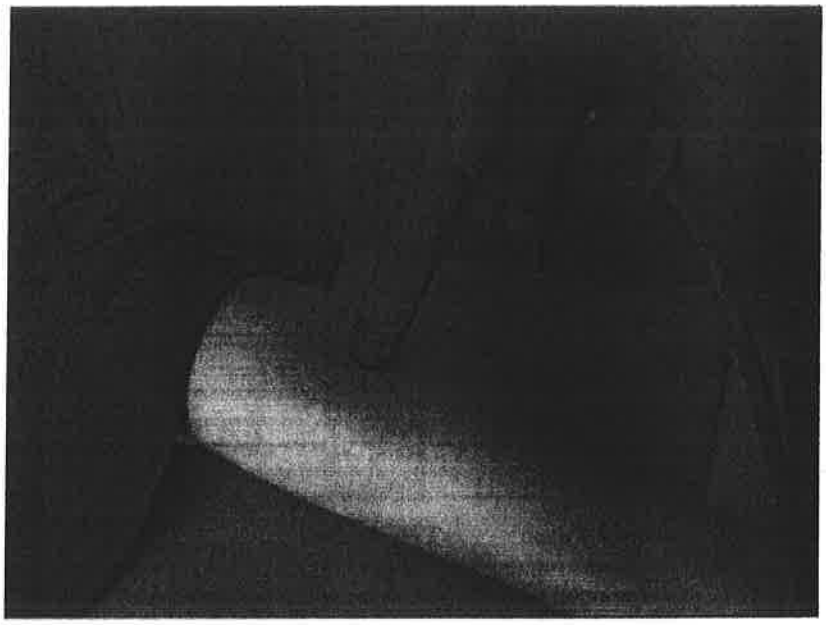

Fig. 1: Calf muscle treatment with pulse transmitter (MP100, Storz Medical AG)

Exclusion criteria were osseous or post-operative induced restriction in ankle joint range of motion, neurological primary diseases, previous thromboembolic events and anticoagulant medication therapy.

The active dorsal extension of the ankle joints was measured by means of a gravity goniometer before and after completion of shock wave therapy and 3 to 6 months later (1 examiner).

The statistical evaluation was performed using the SPSS software. The statistical significance level was set at $p<0.05$.

Results: The average active dorsal extension measured prior to shock wave therapy was 16.7° (12°-19°) (Fig. 2). A significant improvement in the active dorsal extension to 25.8° (21°-32°) was achieved after an average of 4.4 shock wave therapy sessions. Follow-up examinations conducted after an average of 4.6 months (3-6 months) showed that the active dorsal extension had increased to 26.2° (significant improvement from pre-treatment situation but only modest increase from the value measured upon completion of therapy).
Side effects included small subcutaneous hematomas. Sonographic examinations proved that no deeper-sited hematomas had occurred in the muscles as a result of shock wave therapy.

YOUDAS JW, KRAUSE DA, EGAN KS, THERNEAU TM, LASKOWSKI ER (2003) The effect of static stretching of the calf muscle-tendon unit on active ankle dorsiflexion range of motion. J. Orthop. Sports Phys. Ther. 33(7): 408-17

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