Comparative Study of Ultrasound and TENS in the Management of Tennis Elbow

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ABSTRACT

Study Objective: Comparative Study of Ultrasound and TENS in the Management of Tennis Elbow.

Design: Pre & post test control group design.

Method and Measurements: 30 patients from Raj Nursing Home [Age group 25-55 yrs] who were diagnosed with Tennis elbow, with onset >1-3 months were randomly assigned to either group A receiving US and group B receiving TENS. Treatment was given for 10 sessions for the period of 5 week. Before treatment and after 5 weeks of treatment pain was assessed on VAS and MPQ.

Results: Subjects in-group A that received Ultrasound showed greater Improvement in pain compared with the TENS group on 5th week compared with pre treatment. (p<0.050)

Conclusion: The result of study suggests that Ultrasound improves the symptoms of Tennis elbow. TENS also improved the pain symptoms but was too small to reach satisfactory outcome for patients. Based on these results Ultrasound should be the treatment of choice for Tennis elbow rather than TENS.

Key Words: Ultrasound, TENS, Tennis elbow,

INTRODUCTION

Tennis elbow was first used over a century ago to describe a painful condition observed in English lawn tennis players. As a group, tennis players are at a higher risk to develop lateral epicondylitis and some 40 - 50% of them experience this disabling condition, at least once during their playing life time.1

Tennis elbow also known as lateral epicondyle pain, is the inflammation of the extensor carpi radialis brevis tendon. Daily activity such as carrying, lifting and gripping are commonly affected by such pain. Pain is common health problem in the world.2

Tennis elbow is traditionally considered to be self limiting, but may last for 6-18 months. Its estimated prevalence in general population is 3-7%. Workers undertaking repetitive tasks are at greater risk, representing between 35-64% of all cases. More than 40 treatments have been proposed for tennis elbow some of which
have been investigated in clinical trials and systemic reviews.\(^\text{[3]}\)

Ultrasounds (US) refer to mechanical vibrations, which are essentially the same as sound waves but of a higher frequency. US is a deep penetrating modality capable of producing changes in tissue through both thermal and non thermal (mechanical) mechanisms. Depending on the frequency of the waves, US is used for diagnostic imaging, therapeutic tissue healing or tissue destruction.\(^\text{[4]}\)

The reason why TENS has a modulating effect on pain is that it is associated with blocked nociceptive transmission in the spinal cord.\(^\text{[2]}\)

There is no evidence regarding the benefit of using electrotherapy modalities such as interferential, IR, even though these modalities are commonly used in physiotherapy practice.

The guidelines and recent systematic reviews of therapeutic US have highlighted a need for further research to investigate the true effect of these modalities in the context of well conducted randomized controlled trials. As the application of US may have adverse effects for patients with tennis elbow (e.g. because of the transmission of thermal energy).

The aim of Study was to investigate the effects of US with pre-defined doses, on pain intensity and function in patients with Tennis elbow.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

**Subjects:** 30 patients from Raj Nursing Home [Age group 25-65 yrs] who were diagnosed with tennis elbow, at least three month were included in the study randomly assigned to either group A receiving US and group B receiving TENS. Treatment was given for 10 sessions for the period of 5 week. Before treatment and after 5 weeks of treatment pain was assessed on VAS. All the subjects were clinically evaluated by a doctor. Patient with history of cardiovascular disease, liver disease, kidney disease, other organ diseases, and/or complaints of pain in the areas other than elbow, were excluded. Patients, with problems in the care of the electrical stimulation and with skin allergic to electrodes, were also excluded from the study.\(^\text{[2]}\)

**Design:** Study utilized pre & post test control group design.

**Equipment & Measuring Tools:** Examination table, US machine, US gel, TENS machine, VAS scale, MPQ, Pillow.

**Interventions:**

Subjects in each group received 10 sessions of treatment, each around 20 minutes, during a period of 5 weeks. All treatment, Ultrasound delivery, and TENS prescription was provided by qualified and experienced physiotherapist who were instructed by the researcher about study protocol.

**Ultrasound treatment procedure and technique**

Before starting treatment a consent form was given to patients and benefits and risks of procedure including sensations expected during procedure were explained to them. They were positioned (Sitting or lying) with additional pillow support comfortably and assessed thoroughly. Time and intensity was kept at ‘0’ before switching on power. Patients were also instructed to report any excess heat or pain.

Gel was applied to skin and surface of transducer. US head is moved in overlapping circles, rate of transducer movement is 3-4cmsq. Dose of US was 1w/cm\(^2\) with frequency of 1MHz in continuous mode, 1MHz was chosen due to its increased penetration depth. Treatment lasted eight minutes over the effected radiated region.\(^\text{[5]}\)

**Placebo Ultrasound**
Patients in placebo group received same duration of Ultrasound with the apparatus switched on (so that patients see lights flashing on machine) but without any current output. In this way, patients were blinded for Ultrasound treatment.

**TENS Procedure**

The TENS device used in this study is just like other TENS. Two rubber electrodes (2 cm in diameter) were placed on two acupoints on the subjects elbow. The intensity of stimulation was adjusted at a tolerable level for each subject. Patients were treated for fifteen minutes per visit 2 times a week for 5 weeks. [2]

The patients were treated for 10 sessions for period of 5 week. Pain was assessed by VAS and MPQ before starting treatment and on 5<sup>th</sup> week of post treatment session.

In VAS Patients were asked to describe their pain status on a 10cms line where left end represents no pain and right end represents maximum pain.

MPQ consists of a set of pain descriptor list, and are read to a patient with the explicit instruction that he chooses only those words which described his feelings and sensations at that moment.

PRI is based on the rank values of words. In this scoring system, the word in each subclass implying the least pain is given a value of 1, the next word is given a value of 2, etc. The rank values of words chosen by a patient are summed to obtain a score separately for the sensory (subclass 1-10), affective (subclasses 11-15), evaluative (subclass 18) and miscellaneous (subclasses 17-20) words, in addition to provide a total score (subclasses 1-20). The PPI is recorded as a number and is associated with the following words 1-mild, 2-discomforting, 3-distression, 4-horrible, and 5-excruciating.

**Data Analysis:** All Data was analyzed using statistical test-pair t test. Mean and SD for pre Rx and after 5<sup>th</sup> week Rx pain values were calculated for each group. Significance was accepted at 0.05 level of probability.

**Findings:**

In this study 30 patients participated with a mean age of 46.65±14.45 in group A (M, n=7; F, n=8) and 44.75±14.23 in Group B (M, n=7; F, n=8) ranging from 25 to 65 years (Table 1). Sex was matched in both the groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Mean and SD of age between group A and B.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group A (N=15)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean reduction in PRI, PPI &VAS of group A & B with p & t values:

**Mean reduction in PRI (Table 2,)**

Both groups had significant difference in pre Rx to 5<sup>th</sup> week values as t and p values for group A and B were t=14.47, p=0.000 and t=10.53, p=0.000 respectively (table 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Mean reduction in PRI values between group A and B. Mean and standard deviation at pre treatment, 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; week and pre treatment to 5&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; week with t and p values.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group A (N=15) Mean±SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B (N=15) Mean±SD</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Mean reduction in PPI (Table 3,)**

Both groups had significant difference in pre Rx to 5<sup>th</sup> week values as t and p values for group A and B were t=11.67, p=0.000 and t=10.68, p=0.000 respectively (table 3).
Table 3: Mean reduction in PPI values between group A and B. Mean and standard deviation at pre treatment, 5th week and pre treatment to 5th week with t and p values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Pre Rx</th>
<th>5th week</th>
<th>Pre R, to 5th week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td>t value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group A (N=15)</td>
<td>4.65±0.63</td>
<td>0.51±0.54</td>
<td>2.62±0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11.67 0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B (N=15)</td>
<td>4.32±0.63</td>
<td>1.52±0.67</td>
<td>1.86±0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10.68 0.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean reduction in VAS (Table 4.)

Both groups had significant difference in pre Rx to 5th week values as t and p values for group A and B were t=19.04, p=0.000 and t=12.25, p=0.000 respectively (table 4).

Table 4: Mean reduction in VAS values between group A and B. Mean and standard deviation at pre treatment, 5th week and pre treatment to 5th week with t and p values.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>Pre Rx</th>
<th>5th week</th>
<th>Pre R, to 5th week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td>t value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group A (N=15)</td>
<td>7.63±1.24</td>
<td>0.43±0.46</td>
<td>6.49±1.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>19.04 0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group B (N=15)</td>
<td>6.57±1.41</td>
<td>2.81±1.15</td>
<td>2.95±0.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean±SD</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>12.25 0.000</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Thus, it can be concluded from above results that both interventions (US and TENS) were effective in Pain reduction as reflected by VAS and MPQ. But, Patients (group A) that received US showed greater improvement in pain compared with TENS (group B) on 5th week compared with pre treatment.

DISCUSSION

Our findings confirm that Ultrasound enhances recovery in patients with lateral epicondylitis. Although within group comparison showed improvement with respect to decrease in the pain intensity in both individual groups. Whereas, between groups comparisons showed that Ultrasound group subjects pain intensity was significantly reduced while compared to TENS group.

To avoid heating the treated tissue and achieve non-thermal effects, pulsed ultrasound is used where pulse rates interrupt the sound waves at rates of 50%, 80%, or 90%. Nonthermal (biologic) effects result from mechanical alteration of the local, cellular environment induced by the ultrasound waves. [6]

1-MHz ultrasound is most effective at increasing temperature at a tissue depth of 2.5–5 cm, and 3.3-MHz ultrasound is most effective at increasing temperature at a tissue depth of 1.0–2.5 cm. [7]

Most of the publications regarding the application of therapeutic ultrasound suggest treatment periods of 5–10 minutes duration. [8]

Raising the temperature of tissue to ≥3°C decreases the viscoelasticity of collagen, facilitating more effective stretching of tissue. [9]

Forearm band was effective for pain and functional improvement along with the conventional physiotherapy management comprised of the pulsed mode ultrasound therapy with a 20% duty cycle at the frequency of 1 MHz and intensity of 2 W/cm² for a duration of 7.5 minutes and the strengthening and stretching exercises. [9]

It is believed that tens influences pain through different pathways. One of these pathways is the gate-control theory. [10]
The potential prognostic value of TS and DNIC on the pain inhibitory effect of tens is based on this rationale. However, opioid pathways that involve peripheral, spinal and supraspinal mechanisms. [11,13]

Tens may influence pain through the electrical stimulation of low-threshold A-beta cutaneous fibers, the responsiveness of central pain-signaling neurons of OA patients who are centrally sensitized is augmented to the input of these electrical stimuli. [14]

These all study findings support the results of the present study.

CONCLUSION
This study has shown that for the group of patients involved Ultrasound is effective in the treatment of Tennis elbow than TENS.

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Author’s Contributions:
All authors participated in the design of the trail and the drafting of the manuscript. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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