The interface of mechanical loading and biological variables as they pertain to the development of tendinosis

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Abstract

Different tendons are designed to withstand different mechanical loads in their individual environments. Variable physiologic loading ranges and correspondingly different injury thresholds lead to tendon heterogeneity. Also, tendon heterogeneity is evident when examining how different tendons regulate their response to changes in mechanical loading (over- and under-loading). The response of tendons to changes in mechanical loading plays an important role in the induction and progression of tendinosis which is tendon degeneration without inflammation. Tendon overuse injury is likely related to abnormal mechanical loading that deviates from normal mechanical loading in magnitude, frequency, duration and/or direction. Mechanical loading that results in tendon overuse injury can initiate a repair process but, after failed initial repair, non-resolving chronic attempted repair appears to lead to a “smoldering” fibrogenesis. Contributions of regulatory components, including minor components in the “nerve-mast cell-myofibroblast axis” are key features in the development and progression of tendinosis. Hormonal and genetic factors may also influence risk for tendinosis. Further understanding of how tendinosis induction is related to mechanical use/overuse, how tendinosis progression is related to abnormal regulation of attempted repair, and how induction and/or progression are modulated by other risk factors may lead to interventions that mitigate risk and enhance functional repair.

Keywords: Mechanical Loading, Tendon Injury, Tendinosis, Tendinopathy

Introduction

Tendons are a heterogeneous group of structures which normally operate in active mechanical environments at around 30% to 40% of their ultimate tensile strength (UTS)¹; however, different tendons experience different loads based on the muscles to which they are attached. Tendons are comprised of collagens (collagen I, III, and V) and other matrix molecules, as well as a subset of cells (tenocytes, mast cells, neural elements, and microvascular cells). The extracellular matrix (ECM) of tendons and their cellular complement varies along their length. Species variations occur in tendons. Thus, tendons are very heterogeneous, and are uniquely designed to operate within specific mechanical environments.

While tendons are diverse and heterogeneous, they can suffer overt injury with possible rupture, or overuse injury with chronically painful sub-acute loss of function termed tendinopathy. The overuse injury may be related to exposure to abnormal mechanical loading which deviates from normal mechanical loading by changes in magnitude, frequency, duration and/or direction. Tendinosis is tendon degeneration without clinical or histological signs of inflammation². Degenerated tendons are more susceptible to partial or complete rupture than normal tendons, with one study reporting that 97% of ruptured tendons had degenerative changes³. Ruptured tendons had decreased crimp angle and collagen fibre diameters, suggesting that they were less resistant to tensile loading⁴. Histologically, tendinosis is collagen disarray, increased ground substance and cellularity, and possible neovascularization⁵. Tendinopathy describes clinical conditions in and around tendons arising from overuse⁶. The common sites of tendinopathy are tendons with high in vivo loading demands: Achilles tendon (AT) of the ankle, patellar tendon (PT) of the
knee, rotator cuff tendons of the shoulder, including the supraspinatus tendon (SST), and tendons of the elbow, including extensor carpi radialis brevis tendon. Interestingly, tendinosis can arise in specific areas of tendons, but an analogous “ligamentosis” in ligaments has not been described. Ligaments are passive structures which usually operate in low-load mechanical environments at around 5% to 10% of their UTS.

Tendinosis is usually characterized by a lack of inflammatory cells, although abnormal concentrations of cells such as mast cells and neural elements and their associated neuropeptides, as well as tenocytes are present along with an abnormal ECM. Some derangements of the above are not associated with pain, and thus can precede development of overt symptoms. Tendinosis can develop in specific tendons of a subset of athletes engaged in specific sports (e.g. jumper’s knee in volleyball players), is more common in male than female athletes, and can reproducibly occur in specific areas of tendons (e.g. fibrocartilagenous zone, insertions, etc). Whether the male-female differences persist during aging, particularly after menopause, is still an open question (e.g. 8).

**Purpose**

The purpose of this review is to explore our understanding of the influence of mechanical loading on different tendons while considering the different loads they are designed to withstand in their individual environments; as well as, the biological variables (aging, sex, and genetics) which can modulate responsiveness to these individual environments. Having different tendons designed for different environments contributes to tendon heterogeneity, including differential regulation in response to mechanical loading. Response to mechanical loading is a key feature in the induction and progression of tendinosis which will be discussed in some detail, including the possible contributions of regulatory components in tendons to development and progression of tendinosis.

**Normal mechanical loading**

(Different Tendons - Different Environments - Tendon Heterogeneity)

In general, tendons operate at 30% to 40% UTS compared to ligaments at 5% to 10% UTS, based on findings from goat PT and anterior cruciate ligament. In vivo loads have been determined for several human tendons and the variation in these loads emphasizes the heterogeneity of tendons: the AT operates at 50% to 100% UTS in activities ranging from walking to running, the SST operates normally within 25% to 30% UTS; while finger flexor tendons operate around 10% to 20% UTS.

Tendons are designed to work in specific mechanical environments via developmental programs, growth and maturation cues, and to function optimally within boundary conditions. Tendon heterogeneity results, in part, from these different tendons being designed for different mechanical environments. For example, the AT in rabbits has almost three-fold greater collagen crimp amplitude than the corresponding PT. The authors suggested that this increased wave height was designed to provide an increased margin of shock absorbance. Other factors also contribute to tendon heterogeneity. Some tendons operate within a sheath (e.g. flexor, carpal tunnel) and not just the tendon, but also the integrity of the sheath likely has to be considered (i.e. a two component “system”). In addition, some tendons go around a bone which leads to tissue experiencing both compressive and tensile loads, as well as friction points.

**Injuries from mechanical loading**

Mechanical loading is required to maintain tendon homeostasis (Figure 1), but each tendon normally operates within a unique “physiologic window”. Within this normal range or “window” of loading, increases or decreases in loading from the mechanical set point evokes responses in cells at the molecular level: anabolism or catabolism (Figure 1). This leads to adaptation via growth factor expression and growth factor receptor function, cellular metabolism, matrix turnover, and cell-cell interactions.

Overt injury occurs to tendons when a single load exceeds a threshold for injury and, likely, leads to loss of function via integrity failure. Typically, the response to overt injury includes inflammation, initiation of healing, scar formation and tissue remodeling. In this case, biomechanical overload initiates repair processes inherent in the tissue but also results in acute repair via wound healing pathways with influx of cells from systemic sources common to many tissues (Figure 1). The resulting scar tissue can partially restore tendon or ligament function, but the mechanical properties are compromised for years, partly due to composition of the ECM and its organization. It is known that scar fibroblasts are different from normal tenocytes and their interactions via a cell network are also likely different; (Rattner et al., manuscript in preparation). For instance, the crimp found in scar tissue is usually severely different from that of uninjured tissues. This could alter functioning of the tendons.

Overuse injury can also occur in tendons when repeated loading deviates from normal mechanical loading by differences in magnitude, frequency, duration, and/or direction. In other words, the tendon is exposed to either excessive loads, loading outside the normal “window” of adaptation, or repetitive stimuli outside the “window” of normal inherent repair. Fatigue loading is an example of overloading in tendons and ligaments where the peak load of each loading cycle is less than the load that would cause complete failure or overt injury; however, with repeated cyclic loading, mechanical damage accumulates and is marked by a reduction in modulus. Overuse injury can involve microinjury to tendon components, accumulation of insults, activation of inherent inflammatory processes, and attempted repair. In this case, biomechanical overload initiates inherent repair processes but the tissue experiences failed initial repair and this results in a chronic repair process (Figure 1). Non-resolving chronic attempted repair can lead to a “smoldering” fibrogenesis (Figure 2) with matrix
**Tendinosis: Induction and Outcomes**

Tendon Complex → Homeostatic Equilibrium → Set Point

Biomechanical Overload → initiation of inherent repair process

Failed initial repair

Chronic attempted repair
Nerve, vascular, mast cell, tenocyte/fibroblast

Fibrogenesis, Pain, Dysfunction

Resolution
No resolution

Repair (acute)

Altered ECM
Cell death
Non-resolving

Interventions
Progressive dysfunction

*Figure 1. Tendinosis: Induction and outcomes.*

**Tendinosis: Chronic fibrogenesis?**

Injury Response

Repair / Resolution
Deviation of normal process
Failure to effect repairs
Failure of inherent repair mechanisms to mature

Dysregulation of the "nerve-mast cell-myofibroblast axis"

mast cells

mediators

mediators

mediators

nerves

tenocytes/myofibroblasts

NP

Abnormal ECM deposition

Quantity
Molecular species
Remodeling deficiencies

Low grade “smoldering fibrogenesis”

Progressive unless cycle disrupted
Pharmacologic
Innovative loading regimens

*Figure 2. Tendinosis: Chronic fibrogenesis? (NP = neuropeptides).*
Turnover and cell activation without the normal maturation associated with the acute wound healing progression seen after overt injury with systemic cell contributions. Over time, such chronic processes can become symptomatic (e.g. pain) and lead to altered functioning of the affected tissue. Without some intervention (mechanical, biological), it appears that such chronicity contributes to progressive decline in tendon function (Figure 2).

If there is rupture or damage of some, but not all, collagen fibres either due to overt or overuse injury, then some fibres in the tendon will experience less than normal load (underloaded or stress-deprived) and some fibres will experience more than normal load (overloaded) even if the whole tendon is exposed to what would be considered normal mechanical loading if the tendon was intact. Thus, the partial subclinical injury plus a chronic fibrogenesis can contribute to the clinical definition (tendinopathy) and the features of tendon degeneration (tendinosis).

Interestingly, and somewhat paradoxically, specific loading protocols can contribute to restoration of tendon function after initiation of tendinopathy. Thus, appropriate loading may facilitate repair which reinforces the idea that loading is essential for tendon function. Also relevant are reports that tendons from males and females differ in their adaptability to loading as well as their responsiveness to loading. This would support the concept of mechanical loading interfacing with biological variables, a concept discussed in more detail in later sections.

Abnormal mechanical loading

Abnormal mechanical loading can be less than normal loading when the tendon is stress-deprived or more than normal loading when the tendon is over-loaded. Abnormal mechanical loading may be different from normal mechanical loading in magnitude, frequency, duration, and/or direction. Direction refers to the exposure of a tensile load-bearing tendon to compressive or combined loading.

Injury may occur at different thresholds in different tendons because different tendons are designed for different in vivo loading demands. Likewise, injury may occur at different thresholds in ligaments and tendons because tendons are designed for greater loading demands than ligaments during normal daily activities. Like the difference in crimp amplitude between AT and PT, tendons and ligaments have structural and biological differences, reinforcing the concept that tendons function at higher loads than ligaments. Collagen fibril diameters and crimp period are larger in tendon than ligament. Total collagen is greater in tendon with a lower amount of collagen III than ligament. Glycosaminoglycan (GAG) content and amount of reducible cross-links are lower in tendon than ligament. The authors suggested that one possible reason for the differences between tendon and ligament was that these tissues mature or adapt to in vivo stresses, implying that the tendons were more stressed than the ligaments. Because different individual tendons, and tendons and ligaments are designed to operate in specific mechanical environments, these tissues may also have unique responses to changes from their normal mechanical environments.

It should be noted that disruption of tendon integrity can also occur even when operating within a normal mechanical range (i.e. without abnormal mechanical loading) in a small subset of individuals exposed to environmental stimuli that are chemical in nature. The tendon that appears to be uniquely affected is the AT. In a small subset (2-5%) of otherwise normal individuals exposed to fluoroquinolone antibiotics or statins, they experience loss of function or overt rupture when on these drugs. Likely this outcome may be related to genetics, but how or why these drugs differentially influence the AT remains largely unknown. However, such observations raise the interesting point that these tissues are dynamic and can be influenced by both extrinsic and inherent variables.

Heterogeneous response to abnormal mechanical loading (Different Tendons - Different Environments - Different Regulation)

Less than normal load (stress-deprived)

As discussed above, tendons like other connective tissues that operate in a mechanically active environment subscribe to the “use it or lose it” paradigm when it comes to loading. That is, they require loading to maintain integrity, and, if the tissues are deprived of loading, they can undergo atrophy, just like other connective tissues such as menisci, ligaments, muscle, and bone. While some principles are consistent in this regard, some variations have been noted when tissues from different species have been compared, or different tissues in the same general category have been compared (e.g. rat).

In this regard, tendons with different in vivo loading demands exhibit tendon-specific responses to stress-deprivation. Before culturing for 4 hours, rat tissues were stress-deprived by separating tissues from their attachments. Rat SST had the greatest response to stress-deprivation with a 17-fold increase in matrix metalloproteinase-13 (MMP-13) expression compared to time-zero control tendons. Rat AT had increased MMP-13 expression but this response was only 4-fold greater than time-zero control tendons. The up-regulation of MMP-13 in the SST due to stress-deprivation was significantly greater than that in the AT, suggesting that a tendon designed for lower in vivo loading demands was more affected by the loss of loading. Rat medial collateral ligament (MCL) did not have a significant increase in MMP-13 expression as a result of stress-deprivation. These results demonstrate the different response to stress-deprivation between two tendons with different in vivo loading demands, and between tendon and ligament.

Using stress-deprivation for 4 hours in culture, up-regulation of MMP-3 and TIMP-2 mRNA levels compared to time-zero controls was found in SST, AT and MCL. The increased MMP-13 expression is similar to the increases in SST and MCL observed in ruptured human SST and AT. These findings suggest that an up-regulation of MMP-13 following stress-deprivation may, in part, contribute to the progression of tendinopathy in the SST and AT. How-
ever, the MMP-3 expression was increased unlike the decreases observed in ruptured tendons. This would suggest that the response of the cells in the stress-deprived portion of the tendon cannot completely account for the degenerative response and that the cells in the over-loaded portion of the tendon may have an important role in the progression of tendinosis in a partially-damaged tendon.

Up-regulation of MMP-13 with stress-deprivation in rat SST and AT is consistent with observations in rat tail tendon following stress-deprivation for 24 hours and 7 days. In tail tendon, MMP-13 staining was located in regions of damage following sub-rupture tensile loading which caused collagen fibrillar damage. Also, tail tendons exposed to stress-deprivation had lower modulus and UTS compared to normal tendons. If repetitive mechanical loading results in damage to portions of the tendon, up-regulation of MMP-13 due to stress-deprivation in these damaged portions of the tendon could contribute to matrix degradation and corresponding mechanical property deterioration in tendinosis.

Interestingly, in the rabbit MMP-1 appeared to be de-repressed by loss of loading to connective tissues but MMP-13 was not. However, rats and mice do not have a classic MMP-1 in their genome and their equivalent has features of MMP-14. Therefore, at the level of response to loss of loading, there are some consistent features regarding the mechanisms involved. Thus, the “use it or lose it” paradigm likely involves MMP-mediated atrophy.

More than normal load (over-loaded)

Tendons with different in vivo loading demands exhibit tendon-specific responses to similar overuse injury protocols. In a rat model, SST were injured by overuse activity associated with downhill treadmill running: 17m/min, 10 degree decline, 1 hour per day, 5 days per week. The injured SST exhibited with downhill treadmill running: 17m/min, 10 degree decline, a rat model, SST were injured by overuse activity associated don-specific responses to similar overuse injury protocols. In injury protocol had different effects on different tendons with different responses to exposure to intermittent cyclic hydrostatic compression (ICHC). Exposing the attached rat SST to ICHC for 4 hours in culture significantly increased mRNA levels for MMP-13 compared to time-zero control tendon, while MMP-3 and TIMP-2 mRNA levels did not change. For the attached rat AT, ICHC did not lead to alterations in mRNA levels of MMP-13, MMP-3 or TIMP-2 compared to the time-zero controls. This type of “compressive” loading resulted in a 3-fold up-regulation of MMP-13 expression in the SST which was statistically greater than the levels in the AT which did not change. Unique up-regulation of MMP-13 due to ICHC in SST may be related to matrix turnover and could support the impingement injury theory for rotator cuff tears.

Taking these findings together demonstrates that different tendons designed for different mechanical environments are regulated differently in response to abnormal mechanical loading, whether the loading is less than normal (stress-deprived) or more than normal (over-loaded via magnitude, frequency, duration or direction). In addition, as mentioned earlier, different tendons are differentially affected by other external factors; for example, antibiotics, statins, and MMP inhibitors. In this latter study, a subset of patients receiving a synthetic MMP inhibitor (Marimastat) for cancer developed frozen shoulder (~25%) which resolved after discontinuation of the drug. Another 25% of the treated patients developed a Dupuytren’s-like condition so the response to this MMP inhibitor differed from the experience with the antibiotics and statins where the AT was principally affected (discussed above). Thus, the findings with the MMP inhibitor may indicate that normal levels of MMPs in shoulder tendons are required for homeostatic regulation of tissue turnover. Therefore, tendons are heterogeneous at multiple levels and generalization from the study of one tendon cannot be made to another tendon. Also, tendons are dynamic, and not static as they appear to be, and are influenced by age, sex, loading history, and location.

Tendinosis induction and progression

The development and progression of tendinosis may be comprised of two central elements: excessive biomechanical use of the tendon (exceeding the threshold of subclinical disruption of tendon integrity; e.g. overuse syndrome); and a chronic disruption of the inherent biological repair process re-
quired to maintain such integrity leading to an abnormal repair phenotype (Figure 2). Why only a subset of people engaged in a specific activity develop tendinosis may, in part, be attributed to biomechanical factors related to intensity and duration of tendon use, style and appropriateness of the biomechanical stimulation, as well as the genetics of normal ECM composition and function (induction of damage to tendon integrity). As well, biological variation in initiation of acute and chronic aspects of the repair process plus genetic variation in such response phenotypes may contribute to the failure to repair and resolve the response to local injury (acute subclinical repair versus chronic fibrogenic response phenotype).

Regulation of Tendons by Mechanical Loading: Is it all about the ECM and the tenocytes when tendinosis is considered?

Tendons and ligaments consist primarily of a highly organized ECM populated mainly with cells called tenocytes. These are defined as mesenchymal cells of a tendon, but whether they are comprised of heterogenous subsets cannot be determined as good biomarkers are not yet available. Such cells are found dispersed throughout the matrix, but apparently are connected via a cell network; (Rattner et al., manuscript in preparation) that develops during development and maturation. However, the tissue also contains a small number of other cells, some associated with the relatively low content of microvasculature, but others such as mast cells, tissue macrophages, possibly mesenchymal stem cells and nerve endings are also present. The nerve endings contain neuropeptides such as substance P (SP), calcitonin-gene related peptide (CGRP), and other related peptides. Normal tenocytes and ligament cells appear to respond to such neuropeptides in vitro, and, if the nerves are compromised in vivo, it can lead to altered tendon and ligament healing. Nerves and neuropeptides have also been implicated in tendinopathies so abnormal regulation could contribute to development or progression of some forms of the condition in some tendons. Some of the nerve endings parallel the microvasculature and are believed to regulate vascular tone in these tissues. Other nerve endings appear to terminate associated with a mast cell, leading to the possibility that the nerve-mast cell complex also forms a regulatory axis (Figure 2). In addition to somewhat independent regulatory features, such an axis has also been postulated to interact with tenocytes and other fibroblast-like cells in tendons, ligaments and joint capsule leading to generation of myofibroblasts. Thus, these putative regulatory systems in tendons and other connective tissues could also play important roles in maintenance of tendon function and tendinosis development and progression that are in excess of their relative paucity in the tissues. Thus, the tendency is to focus on the main cell types (e.g. tenocytes) and their interaction with the primary loading-bearing component (e.g. the ECM) and largely ignore the minor components and how they are affected by the matrix (over- or under-loading). This may be an oversight to not factor some of these “minor” components into consideration when associating loading with atrophy or tendinosis.

As mentioned previously, denervation can compromise the healing of both tendons and ligaments following a traumatic failure. However, the healing tissue is essentially unloaded during the initial inflammatory and matrix deposition phases of healing. More relevant is how these components respond to loading under normal and abnormal loading environments.

Interestingly, Butler has provided some interesting speculations built on the knowledge that nerves in many locations are subjected to loading and have to stretch to adapt to the loading. He postulated that “the nervous system must have optimal mechanical function just like other structures in the body.” Similarly, the microvasculature must also adapt to tensile loading by stretching to some extent. This concept has more recently been picked up by Webborn. While still somewhat speculative, the concept for how some of the minor components could contribute to tendinosis development and progression is intriguing and deserves further investigation. While intriguing, such contributions likely cannot explain all features of tendinosis and tendon degeneration occurring in specific locations of tendons (e.g. fairly aneural and avascular areas of central tendons) or along their length (e.g. the fibrocartilage-like region of the SST). However, it could explain tendinosis in some tendons where there is extensive involvement of the paratendinous tissue (e.g. AT); as well as some of the contralateral effects observed in tendinosis of some tendons which likely is based on nerve connections at the level of the spine and dorsal root ganglions.

A key distinction for the contribution of major and minor elements that are subjected to loading in the tendon may reside at the level of tendinosis induction/initiating events versus those involved in progression and chronic features of the process including symptoms such as pain. As shown by Scott et al., many samples of patellar tendon from asymptomatic and symptomatic individuals express features consistent with early tendinosis. There were elevated numbers of nerves, mast cells, myofibroblasts and matrix alterations detected in a fair subset of the samples examined, so even in this “early” stage the putative “nerve-mast cell-myofibroblast axis” may be in play with the mechanical environment prior to overt symptom development. This “axis” consists of nerve endings containing neuropeptides such as SP and CGRP which when activated impact tissue mast cells to release mediators which in turn affect fibroblasts and their conversion to myofibroblasts. It is clear from this literature that this is likely not a unidirectional “axis” and, in fact, is multidirectional. Dysregulation of this proposed axis would lead to altered matrix deposition and turnover contributing to the chronic fibrogenesis (Figure 2). Modifying this axis at the mast cell level using mast cell stabilizers approved for use in humans have been shown to influence tendon healing, and outcomes in other models of fibrogenesis, so potential interventions to provide new information on the role of this axis in human tendinopathy/tendinosis patients are available for clinical investigations.

In other preclinical models of tendinosis such as the Back-
man model of overuse in the rabbit, the alterations to the AT by “mechanical overuse” appears first in the lateral paratenon of the tissue complex and then later involves the tendon. This is interesting as it is not clear how direct loading of the paratenon occurs by the overuse protocol as most of the load should be transmitted via the tendon proper. As the paratenon is more vascularized and innervated than the tendon proper, perhaps the involvement of the nerve-mast cell axis also involves the microcirculation and is bidirectional with the loading of the tendon leading to signals being transmitted to elements of the paratenon. Interestingly, this concept could explain the observed contralateral effect seen in the Backman model with neural signals being transmitted to the spine and subsequently to the contralateral tendon inducing alterations. An additional unique feature of overuse loading and the mechanobiological alterations resulting from the protocols was the detection of non-neural expression of neuropeptides with progressive loading. Whether these alterations were due to unique mechano-influenced differentiation of a subset of stem cells in the tendon which were induced by the environment to uniquely express neuropeptides remains to be determined, but it is an interesting finding which may have relevance to how mechanical loading leads to alterations in the axis with chronic stimulation to involve new elements.

Other Potential Modulating Influences on Development of Tendinosis/Tendinopathy by Mechanical Loading

Age / Sex-gender

Tendon and ligament injuries can happen to patients of all ages, with tendinopathy primarily affecting those over age 25. Rotator cuff tendinopathies are increasingly frequent after age 55. The incidence of patellar and Achilles tendinopathies increases between age 18 and 55 with clinical problems after age 30; however, some patellar tendinopathies can onset before age 18 in athletes. Tendinopathy may affect men and women differently. Sports-related overuse injuries affect more men than women and work-related overuse injuries affect more women than men, particularly after age 30. In the pre-menopausal years, women have lower risk than men for developing lower limb tendinopathies. In the post-menopausal years, this risk in women appears to increase with aging for the AT based on tendon rupture, and may be influenced by activity levels and use of hormone replacement therapy (e.g. endocrine estrogen). However, the mechanisms behind some of these observations are still not understood in detail.

As mentioned above, there appears to be some sex differences in the development of tendinosis/tendinopathy in younger athletes, and this may also be evident in older populations (e.g. post-menopausal females) for some tendons (e.g. the AT). Therefore, the hormonal environment may influence how the mechanobiological signals from overloading result in development of symptoms and tendon degeneration. As all connective tissues appear to express sex hormone receptors, it is clear that such tissues should be responsive to hormones but some sex differences have been noted for the response of tendons to neuropeptides in experimental models. Intrinsic differences were also noted for male versus female tendons, as well as pregnant versus non-pregnant young rabbits when the influences of neuropeptides were assessed. Pregnancy leads to alterations in endocrine sex hormone levels so is relevant to this discussion. Some joints become more lax during pregnancy, so ligaments and tendons are targets for such influences but the mechanisms are not clear and may involve a genetic component. Interestingly, the responsiveness of neuropeptides was abolished in some ligaments and tendons during pregnancy, likely indicating that interplay exists between different biological regulatory systems. Such a conclusion is also supported by a case report where a woman with long standing bilateral AT tendinopathy experienced an extended remission of symptoms when pregnant, symptoms that reappeared in the post-partum period. While it is unknown whether there were changes to the tendons directly during pregnancy, the reappearance after pregnancy would suggest not, so one can likely separate symptoms from pathology in such cases. Therefore, under non-overuse conditions some sex-associated factors are apparently operative. The details of the mechanisms underlying the pregnancy-associated changes in ligaments and tendons are not known, but certainly in preclinical rabbit models, the tissues appear to become resistant to influence by neuropeptides at multiple levels.

Much of the literature would indicate that menstrual cycle variations do not influence the function of a variety of human tendons in vivo in otherwise healthy young females. While relevant to tendons operating within a normal physiologic window, the real test would be to assess the influence of fluctuating hormone levels on development and progression of mechanically-induced overuse/tendinosis. This has not been done for obvious reasons as yet, but could be simulated in some preclinical models such as the Backman model in the future.

In contrast to menstrual cycle variations, menopause leads to a permanent alteration via the loss of systemic estrogen and progesterone production by the major producing tissues. Except for local production by some cells, this leads to an alteration in the hormonal “set point” for tendons and other connective tissues, in particular, the balance between estrogens/progestins and androgens. While the literature in this area (e.g. the interplay between mechanical loading and menopause) is not complete or well developed presently, it is clear that older females do have a high level of degenerative changes in some tendons, so it is possible that the “physiologic window” for females regarding tendon loading is dynamic, depending in part on hormonal status. While speculation at this point, it is clear that in the postmenopausal state some females have a higher incidence of osteoporosis, osteoarthritis, and other conditions, observations that perhaps may include tendons as well. Some literature has investigated potential hormonal and loading influences on pre- and post-menopausal women which support a role in normal tendon function.
Mechanical Loading, Tendinosis/Tendinopathy and Genetics/Genomics – the final frontier?

It is clear that not all athletes or participants in an activity develop tendinosis/tendinopathy. While some of this variability may be related to non-genetic factors (e.g. style, frequency of training, nutrition, age, etc.), the role of genetic factors in the development and progression of tendinosis/tendinopathy remains unclear. It is clear that single gene mutations such as Marfan’s syndrome and the Ehlers-Danlos syndromes can influence a variety of connective tissues, including tendons. Similarly, there is some evidence that conditions like Joint Hypermobility Syndromes have a genetic component. However, it is possible that the genome may also harbor many genetic variations that remain undetected under normal usage circumstances, but in aggregate contribute to development of tendinopathies and/or their progression. Thus, the influence of some genetic variation may only become evident when the tendons are stressed mechanically in some manner, either through variations in the actual ECM components and/or their organization, or at the level of repair processes to maintain integrity of the tissue. As discussed previously, tendons appear to differ in their loading environments and respond to a lack of loading in a tendon-specific manner. Therefore, some genetic variation may become evident when a specific tendon is subjected to mechanical stresses, but not others. Recent evidence has started to elucidate the association of single nucleotide polymorphisms and RFLP sequences with tendon injuries and tendinopathies, so it is likely that extending such approaches may provide further insights into the complex relationship(s) between mechanobiology and maintenance of tissue integrity with regard to risk for tendinopathy/tendinosis development and progression in specific tendons. With the availability of the human genome sequence and the emerging number of animal model sequences, an effort is being made to gain a more complete understanding in this area is not only becoming more feasible, but is also one which could impact athletes and their training as well as occupational health for those engaged in a variety of jobs which may put them at risk.

Summary

Mechanical loading likely plays a critical and central role in the development and progression of tendinopathies and tendinosis. Specific tendons appear to have unique and distinct features contributing to their success in a variety of loading environments. How loading via mechanobiological response patterns uniquely affects the integrity of a tendon and relates to sex, genetics and activity is starting to become elucidated. Continued development of new understanding of how different tendons are regulated normally, particularly at the loading and genetic levels, may in the future lead to identification of those at risk for developing tendon dysfunctions as a result of athletic and occupational activities. Specifically, how:

1. Induction of tendinosis may be related to biomechanical factors regarding use/overuse.

2. Progression of chronic tendinosis in at least some patients may be related to abnormal regulation of attempted repair processes (e.g. non-resolving fibrogenic responses).

3. Both 1 and 2, or either component may be influenced by hormonal variables and genetic risk factors (e.g. risk for injury and/or dysfunctional repair).

As very active structures working in complex loading environments, tendons have risk for developing dysfunctions (e.g. tendinosis/tendinopathies) that ligaments appear not to harbor. Further understanding of processes leading to non-function restoring chronic fibrogenic responses (e.g. at the loading, genetic, molecular and cellular levels) should lead to improved interventions to enhance functional repair and restore pain-free mobility.

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