

## Research Article



# The Relationship Between Knee Moments and Function with Western Ontario and McMaster Universities in Moderate Knee Osteoarthritis

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** The knee is the most affected weight-bearing joint by osteoarthritis. The kinetics parameters are correlated with the progression of knee osteoarthritis (KOA). This study was done to investigate the relationship between kinetics parameters and functional tests with Western Ontario and McMaster Universities osteoarthritis index (WOMAC) scores in people with moderate KOA.

**Materials and Methods:** Twenty- three participants with moderate KOA participated in this study. Gait analysis involved the measurement of the external peak knee adduction moment (PKAM), peak knee flexion moment (PKFM), knee adduction moment impulse (KAM impulse), and knee flexion moment impulse (KFM impulse) during level walking. Functional tests included timed up and go (TUG) and figure of eight walkings (FO8W) tests. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to investigate the correlation between kinetics parameters and functional test scores with WOMAC total scores and sub-scores.

**Results:** There was a significant inverse correlation between the first PKAM and WOMAC total score and pain sub-score ( $r=-0.43$   $P=0.03$  and  $r=-0.6$   $P=0.002$ , respectively). Also, there was a significant inverse correlation between the second PKAM and pain sub-score ( $r=-0.46$   $P=0.02$ ). There was no significant correlation between functional tests and WOMAC scores.

**Conclusion:** The low score of the WOMAC in the moderate KOA should not be attributed to the low level of joint knee moments.

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## 1. Introduction

**K**nee osteoarthritis (KOA) is the most common form of arthritis [1]. In 2020, the prevalence of KOA in the world was 22.9%, and in Asia 19.2% [2]. The greater prevalence of this disease in the medial tibiofemoral joint is due to the greater force on the medial cartilage [3, 4] associated with greater knee adduction moment [4, 5]. Knee adduction moment (KAM) is a good predictor of medial-lateral load distribution [6] and is highly related to a knee contact force [7]. From the mechanical point of view, during functional activities, such as walking and climbing stairs, the knee joint's medial compartment bears greater force than the lateral compartment [8]. Greater peak knee adduction moment (PKAM) is related to the presence [9], severity [10], and progression of knee osteoarthritis [11], and pain [12]. Pain is the most common complaint in people with KOA [13]. Pain, stiffness, and difficulty in knee movement are the most common signs of KOA that reduce the patient's ability and quality of life [14]. Although less frequently used, the KAM impulse may be important because it indicates cumulative loading of the medial tibiofemoral joint during the stance phase of gait [15]. PKAM represents the force at one point in the stance phase and does not consider the total time that force applies to the knee joint, which can be influenced by gait speed [16]. KAM impulse takes into account both time and magnitude of force; thus, it provides more complete information about the detailed loading status [16] and is more sensitive compared to PKAM in the diagnosis of different severities of KOA based on Kellgren Lawrence (KL) grade or alignment [16]. The KL global rating system detects the severity of KOA based on the presence of osteophytes, joint space narrowing, and subchondral sclerosis, and then grades the severity from 0 to 4 [17, 18]. Also, the increase in the knee flexion moment (KFM) has been suggested to significantly contribute to greater knee contact force despite the reduction in KAM [19, 20]. Higher peak knee flexion moment (PKFM) during gait has been previously demonstrated in people with KOA than OA-free individuals [21-23]. It has been reported that greater KFM is associated with faster progression of KOA [24]. Furthermore, the KFM impulse takes into account the area below the KFM-time curve, and it seems to be more related to KOA than KFM [25-27].

The Western Ontario and McMaster Universities osteoarthritis index (WOMAC) questionnaire is a patient-based subjective instrument that is the most commonly used clinical instrument for assessing people with KOA [28]. WOMAC questionnaire has been used to evaluate

the effectiveness of surgical procedures [29, 30], therapeutic devices [31-33], biofeedback [34] and physical therapy [35] in a randomized control trial [36]. Various validation studies of the WOMAC questionnaire have made this a valuable instrument for assessing therapeutic methods [28]. Shull et al. reported that after a six-week gait retraining, the first PKAM significantly decreased immediately after training and 1-month follow-up, with improvement in WOMAC pain and WOMAC function sub-score at both time points [37]. Hunt et al. reported that after four months of gait retraining, the second PKAM decreased significantly in the intervention group and the first PKAM increased in the control group, but WOMAC pain and WOMAC function sub-score as a long-term effect improved in both groups [38]. Cheung et al. evaluated the effect of gait retraining on pain, function, and joint stiffness six weeks and six months after training in people with early KOA [39]. They showed an improvement in total WOMAC score, pain, and function sub-scores with a significant reduction in the first PKAM six weeks and six months after gait retraining [39]. Falahatgar et al. reported that PKAM did not change the following orthosis, but WOMAC pain and WOMAC function sub-score improved [40]. Erhart et al. stated that after using six months of variable stiffness shoes, no relationship was seen between the first PKAM and WOMAC pain and WOMAC function score [41]. Also, they showed a significant relationship between KAM impulse and WOMAC pain and function sub-scores [41]. It seems that there is a controversy about the direction of changes in PKAM and WOMAC questionnaire scores in different studies [42, 43].

Measuring adduction and flexion moments require a motion analysis system that is very expensive that is not available in all hospitals and health centers. Thus, if there is a significant relationship between adductor and flexor moment parameters with WOMAC score, it will be helpful to attribute the changes in knee joint loading to clinical assessment. It can be important to study this relationship in estimating the loading status and the effectiveness of empowerment methods in reducing knee joint loading. No study has examined the correlation between KFM impulse and WOMAC questionnaire score in people with moderate KOA.

As a functional test, timed up and go (TUG) and figure of eight walk (FO8W) tests have been used for the assessment of OA patients and appear to be useful and responsive outcome measures to guide clinical care and evaluate mobility difficulty [44-47]. The correlation between these functional tests and the WOMAC questionnaire is important because they are frequently used together or alone to evaluate and

follow up with people with KOA in clinical practice [48-51]. Several studies have reported changes in TUG as a functional test and the score of the WOMAC questionnaire as a subjective test after training [48-50]. Recently, a significant and weak correlation has been demonstrated between the functional domain WOMAC and TUG in people with moderate to severe KOA [52].

Understanding the association between measures of knee joint moments as a surrogate for joint loading and clinical outcomes in people with KOA will help guide future research to optimize treatment and identify people with KOA most likely to gain clinical benefit with intervention. As far as we know, no study has ever examined the relationship between kinetics, functional objective, and subjective tests in a cross-sectional study in people with moderate KOA.

This study was done to evaluate the correlation between kinetics parameters (PKAM, KAM impulse, PKFM, and KFM impulse) during level walking and using functional tests and the WOMAC questionnaire in people with moderate KOA. We hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between the first PKAM, second PKAM, and PKFM with WOMAC score. Another hypothesis was a positive correlation between the KAM impulse and KFM impulse with the WOMAC score. Finally, we hypothesized that there would be a positive correlation between functional test scores (TUG and FO8W) and WOMAC scores in people with moderate KOA.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### Study design

This cross-sectional study was conducted at the motion analysis laboratory of the physical therapy department at [Tarbiat Modares University](#), Tehran, Iran. The sample size was predicted based on Hall et al.'s research, according to the Mean±SD of the PKAM, with a 95% confidence interval and 80% of the power in subjects with KOA [53].

### Participants

Twenty-three patients with moderate KOA were recruited through [Tarbiat Modares University](#) Health Center and the Rheumatology Department of [Baqiyatallah University of Medical Sciences](#). Inclusion criteria were confirmation of grade 2 and 3 unilateral KOA based on the Kellgren Lawrence scale [54] by a rheumatologist via standard anterior/posterior knee X-ray, the age of 45-65 years, body mass index (BMI) of 25-35, and the ability to walk on an even surface without any aids.

Exclusion criteria were a history of intra-articular injection within the past six months, participation in strengthening or musculoskeletal exercise programs within the past three months, neurological, vestibular, and musculoskeletal diseases, lower limb joint damage, affecting balance, and osteoporosis. The study's aim and method were entirely explained to all eligible participants and then, they signed the consent form. All volunteer patients participated in all assessments and there was no drop-out.

### Data collection

All assessments were performed from 9 AM to 11 AM, by an expert physiotherapist. In the motion analysis lab, after familiarizing the participants with the laboratory environment and how to evaluate the parameters, anthropometric information was recorded. Then, they were asked to complete the WOMAC Persian questionnaire, a valid and reliable clinical tool for reporting KOA [28]. An expert physiotherapist guided them if needed. A Vicon motion analysis system (Vicon, Oxford, UK) captured walking using eight cameras (Vero, 2.2 MP, UK). The motion analysis system was synchronized with a force plate (9286B; Kistler Co., Winterthur, Switzerland). The frequency of the camera recording was 120 Hz.

A standard Plug-in-Gait lower body marker set was used, containing 16 retro-reflective markers (Figure 1). The markers adhered bilaterally on the second metatarsal head, calcanei, malleoli, tibia, femur, femoral epicondyle, and anterior and posterior superior iliac spines [55]. After a static calibration trial, the participants were asked to walk at a comfortable preferred speed along the 5.3 m laboratory walkway. Three successful walking trials on the walkway were recorded. Using the ground reaction force, we determined the first (at the first half of the stance phase) and second (at the second half of the stance phase) peaks of KAM, KAM, PKFM, and KFM impulse as a normalized value to body weight. For doing TUG, we used a chair with arms, and the participants were instructed as follows: "Go, stand up, walk comfortably and safely three meters, walk around, come back, and sit back on the chair." The timing was started on the word "go" and ended when the participants returned to the chair" [56]. For performing FO8W, participants were instructed to stand mid-way between two cones that were placed five feet apart, facing outward from the plane of the cones, and walked at their comfort speed in a counter-clockwise direction in a figure of eight paths around the cones. Timing started when participants took the first step and stopped until both of their feet returned to the starting position. The time was recorded by a stopwatch [56]. An average of three recorded trials was used for data analysis.

### Data processing

Motion data were low-pass filtered with a Butterworth filter (fourth order, cut-off frequency 5 Hz). KAM was calculated as the ground reaction force moment about the knee joint center [57]. The knee adduction moment was reported in the tibial reference frame with the mediolateral (y) axis parallel to the knee rotation axis. The first and second KAM peaks were identified as the maximum moment during 0–50% (early stance) and 51–100% (late stance) of the stance, respectively [58] (Figure 2 A). PKFM was described as the highest moment during the stance phase [6] (Figure 2 A). KAM impulse was calculated as the area under the curve of the KAM and reflected both the magnitude and duration of the KAM waveform [6] (Figure 2 B). KFM impulse was calculated as the integral of knee flexion moment (Nm/kg) concerning time (milliseconds) when sagittal plane knee moment was positive for each walking trial [59] (Figure 2 C). We used a custom-written MATLAB™ software, version 2018 to calculate kinetics parameters (MathWorks Inc, Natick, MA).

### Statistical analysis

The Shapiro-Wilk test was applied to assess the normal distribution of data. Based on normal distribution, we used Pearson's correlation coefficient to investigate the correlation between kinetics parameters (PKAM, KAM impulse, PKFM, and KFM impulse) and scores of functional tests (TUG and FO8W) with WOMAC total score and sub-scores. Statistical significance was set at

$P \leq 0.05$ . SPSS software, version 25 (IBM NY, USA) was used for statistical analysis.

### 3. Results

Characteristics data and explanatory gait for 23 participants are shown in Table 1. For participants with moderate KOA, the first PKAM was significantly and inversely related to the total WOMAC and pain sub-score, respectively ( $r = -0.43$   $P = 0.03$  and  $r = -0.6$   $P = 0.002$ , respectively) (Figure 3 A, B, respectively). There was no significant relationship between the first PKAM, function, and stiffness sub-scores ( $P > 0.05$ ). The second PKAM was significantly and inversely related to the pain sub-score ( $r = -0.46$   $P = 0.02$ ) (Figure 3 C). No significant relationship was seen between the second PKAM and the total score of WOMAC, sub-scores of function, and stiffness ( $P > 0.05$ ). The relationship between the KAM impulse and the WOMAC score was insignificant ( $P > 0.05$ ). There was no significant relationship between PKFM and KFM impulse with WOMAC score ( $P > 0.05$ ). The results showed no significant relationship between TUG and FO8W scores with the WOMAC score ( $P > 0.05$ ) (Table 2).

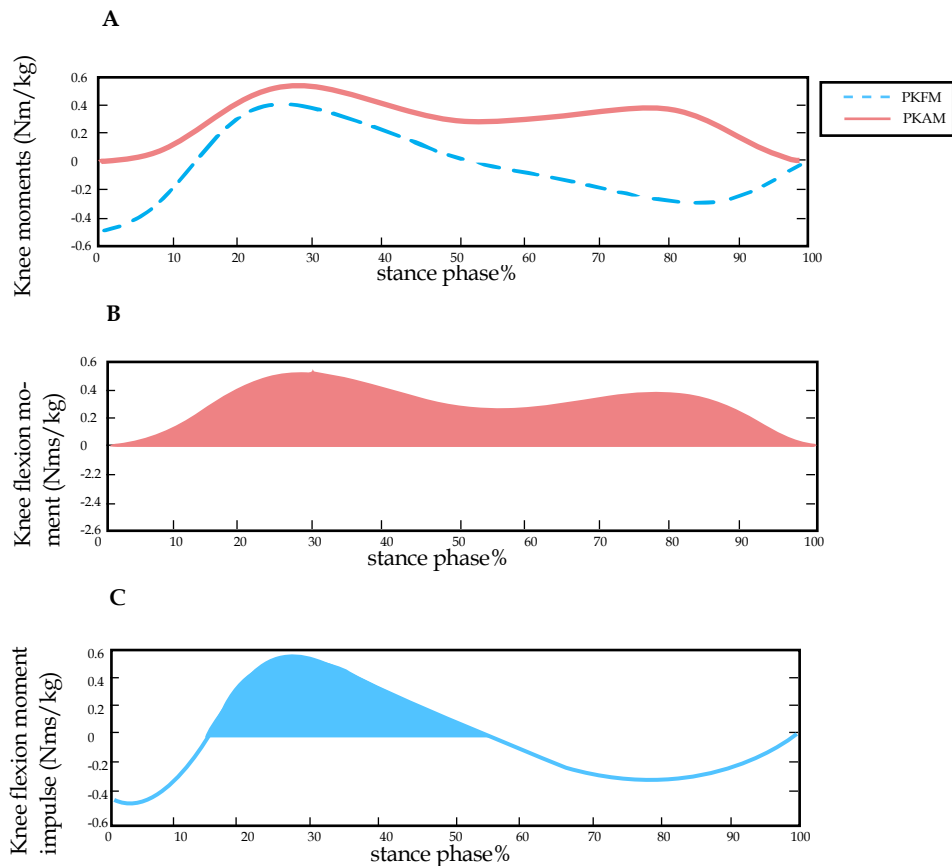
### 4. Discussion

This study was done to determine the relationship between WOMAC scores, kinetics parameters, and functional test scores. We found a significant inverse correlation between the first PKAM and WOMAC total score and pain sub-score. In addition, there was a significant



Figure 1. The setting of the Plug-in-Gait lower body containing 16 retro-reflective markers





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**Figure 2.** A) The first and second peak knee adduction moments and peak flexion moment, B) The knee adduction moment impulse in the stance phase, C) The knee flexion moment impulse in the stance phase.

PKAM: The peak knee adduction moment.

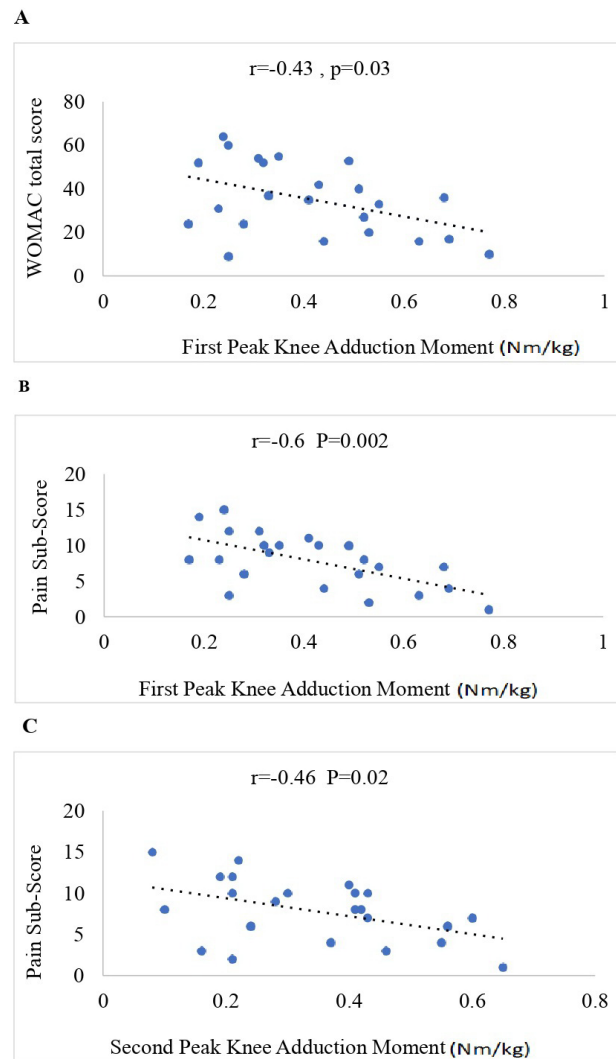
inverse correlation between the second PKAM and WOMAC pain sub-score.

KOA is not a fatal disease, but it causes a major impact on the physical and social activity and quality of life of people with KOA. In KOA, the radiological finding is rarely correlated with functional impairment [60, 61], and we hypothesized that WOMAC score can cause a positive relationship with PKAM in people with moderate KOA. Contrary to the first hypothesis, there was an inverse correlation between the first PKAM and WOMAC total scores and between the first and second PKAM and pain sub-score.

Degenerative joint damage develops gradually, and people with KOA use adaptive and compensatory strategies to reduce pain; thus, the PKAM may not be consistent with the score of the subjective assessment of the WOMAC questionnaire. Although increased PKAM is correlated with structural progression of KOA [15, 24, 62], concurrent improvement has been reported in clinical outcomes with increased [38, 63, 64] rather than de-

creased [37, 39] first PKAM after exercise. Sometimes, clinical outcomes are improved with no change in movement parameters [40]. Also, reducing function leads to sedentariness that can trigger depression and negatively impact pain. Thus, it is possible that using this questionnaire allows people with KOA to overestimate their symptoms to speed up surgical management and receive secondary gains [65].

As mentioned above, there was a significant inverse correlation between the first and second PKAM and WOMAC pain sub-score. The KAM may be associated with pain, but this correlation is debatable. The pain experience of people with KOA is multifactorial [66]. Our study's lack of positive correlation is perhaps because knee joint pain is not the only result of mechanical loading conditions. Other factors should be considered, such as muscle weakness, neuromuscular control [67], proprioception, and coordination [33]. Therefore, it seems that only having a kinetic point of view of decision-making concerning this correlation is not complete. Jain et al. reported that the WOMAC questionnaire



**Figure 3.** Scatter plots show the correlation between: A) The first peak knee adduction moment and the WOMAC total score, B) The first peak knee adduction moment and pain sub-score, C) The second peak knee adduction moment and pain sub-score.

has superior sensitivity in reduced pain, increased range of motion, and reduced disability [68]. Furthermore, Amin et al. showed that people with higher KAM were more likely to develop chronic pain within 3-4 years [69]. Increased medial compartment loading during weight-bearing activities, such as walking may lead to pain due to intraosseous pressure, ischemia, and effusion [70]. Local mechanical stress at the knee joint is a risk factor for the development of incidental knee pain [71]. Nevertheless, studies exploring the correlation between KAM and pain intensity reported inconsistent findings [53, 72, 73]. In support of our result, Weidenhielm et al. did not find a relationship between KAM and pain and function by a modified British Orthopedic Association knee function chart [74]. Hall et al. demonstrated a relationship between PKAM and pain based on WOMAC and visual analog score (VAS) and function in

people with mild and moderate KOA based on KL (grades 2 and 3) [53]. Henriksen et al. reported a negative correlation between PKAM and pain intensity based on VAS in less severe KOA ( $KL \leq 2$ ) and no relationship in more severe KOA ( $KL > 2$ ) [73]. Furthermore, other studies have demonstrated that pain intensity assessed with the pain sub-score of the WOMAC questionnaire was also not correlated with the magnitude of KAM in people with KOA [75, 76]. Previous longitudinal studies have found an inverse correlation between a reduction in pain with non-steroidal anti-inflammatories and increase in the PKAM in people with KOA [77, 78]. An inverse correlation between VAS pain intensity and KAM was reported in previous studies in participants with mild KOA [73, 79]. Contrary to our finding, Thrope et al. reported a positive correlation between KAM and WOMAC pain sub-score in mild KOA (KL grade 2) [12].

**Table 1.** Participant's characteristics and value of the kinetics parameters

Variables		Mean±SD/No. (%)
Age (y)		54.17±7.26
Height (m)		1.61±0.07
Mass (kg)		76.87±8.76
BMI (kg/m <sup>2</sup> )		29.70±3.24
Gender	Female	19(82.6)
	Male	4(17.39)
1 <sup>st</sup> PKAM (Nm/kg)		0.41±0.17
2 <sup>nd</sup> PKAM (Nm/kg)		0.34±0.15
KAM impulse (Nm/kg)		0.12±0.07
PKFM (Nm/kg)		0.18±0.28
KAM impulse (Nm/kg)		0.02±0.02

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Abbreviations: PKAM: The peak knee adduction moment, KAM impulse: The knee adduction moment impulse, PKFM: The peak knee flexion moment; KFM impulse: The knee flexion moment impulse, SD: Standard deviation.

Kim et al. showed a strong significant relationship between single-limb stance KAM and the pain, function, and total WOMAC scores in people with symptomatic radiographic knee OA [65]. A negative correlation between KAM and pain may indicate that people with KOA adopt a compensatory gait pattern to decrease knee joint loading [10] and pain in the affected knee [65]. This inverse correlation could be an avoidance mechanism in response to pain-provoking stimuli [73]. Also, pain is a protective strategy that leads to a self-selected reduction in KAM during walking [21, 77]. Generally, the presence of conflicting results on the correlation between KAM and clinical symptoms, such as pain and disability is that the WOMAC questionnaire evaluates individuals' perception of mobility [80]. For example, the function domain of WOMAC assesses the subjective perception of the people in their daily life ability; it seems that this domain is not considered the sole evaluation device for improvement and worsening of functional capacity to evaluate the efficiency of a given treatment [52]. Furthermore, this questionnaire is affected by motivation and provides less information about participants' perception of their environment [81-83]. It should be noted that the questionnaire presents some limitations that are associated with several factors, including mood, motivation, fatigue, health, memory fluctuation, specific knowledge, and familiarity with test items [52]. Although it is difficult to interpret the relationship in this cross-sectional study, the results contain a clinical point that the low score of the WOMAC questionnaire

in KOA people should not be attributed to the low level of joint contact forces.

There was no significant correlation between KAM impulse and WOMAC pain. Hall et al. reported no significant correlation between KAM impulse and WOMAC pain and pain intensity based on the numerical rating scale (NRS) in people with mild KOA (KL 2) and a significant positive correlation between KAM impulse and NRS pain and WOMAC pain in people with moderate KOA (KL 3) and a significant inverse correlation between KAM impulse and WOMAC pain in people with severe KOA (KL 4) [53]. Henriksen et al. also reported a positive correlation between pain intensity based on VAS and KAM impulse in severe KOA (KL>2) [73]. Kito et al. reported a positive correlation between KAM impulse and pain, stiffness, function, and disability sub-score and total score based on a Japanese knee osteoarthritis measure (JKOM) [84]. The discrepancies between our results and other studies may be due to the fact that the relationship between KAM impulse and WOMAC score is dependent on KOA severity, and we only assessed grades 2 and 3 according to the KL criteria.

We found no significant correlation between KFM parameters and WOMAC score. Huang et al. reported a significant positive correlation between KFM and pain intensity based on VAS. They showed no relationship between KFM and pain intensity based on a knee injury and

**Table 2.** The correlation of WOMAC sub-scores and knee moments

WOMAC Score Kinetics Parameters	Total Score	Pain Sub-score	Function Sub-score	Stiffness Sub-score
1 <sup>st</sup> PKAM (Nm/kg)	r=-0.43* P=0.03	r=-0.6* P=0.002	r=-0.15 P=0.48	r=-0.38 P=0.07
2 <sup>nd</sup> PKAM (Nm/kg)	r=-0.36 P=0.08	r=-0.46* P=0.02	r=-0.15 P=0.48	r=0.33 P=0.12
KAM impulse (Nms/kg)	r=-0.32 P=0.13	r=-0.36 P=0.09	r=-0.11 P=0.61	r=-0.3 P=0.15
PKFM (Nm/kg)	r=-0.14 P=0.51	r=-0.09 P=0.67	r=-0.03 P=0.88	r=-0.16 P=0.46
KFM impulse (Nms/kg)	r=-0.08 P=0.7	r=-0.002 P=0.99	r=0.05 P=0.82	r=-0.12 P=0.58
TUG (s)	r=0.3 P=0.15	r=0.26 P=0.22	r=0.18 P=0.4	r=-0.3 P=0.15
FO8W (s)	r=0.27 P=0.2	r=0.18 P=0.39	r=0.03 P=0.87	r=0.3 P=0.15

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Abbreviations: PKAM: The peak knee adduction moment; KAM impulse: The knee adduction moment impulse; PKFM: The peak knee flexion moment; KFM impulse: The knee flexion moment impulse; TUG: The timed up and go test; FO8W: The figure of eight walking test.

\*Statistical significance ( $P \leq 0.05$ ).

osteoarthritis outcome score (KOOS) [85]. O’Connell et al. reported limited information about the positive association between knee pain based on the WOMAC questionnaire and KFM [79]. A possible explanation for the discrepancy between these studies could be that the WOMAC questionnaire is a multidimensional tool emphasizing disease progression and joint function, and the WOMAC subscale measures pain intensity on a Likert-type scale during several activities, including level walking [80]. However, no study has been conducted on the relationship between KFM impulse and WOMAC score.

We found no correlation between the WOMAC score and TUG and FO8W scores. One reason for the lack of correlation between these functional tests and WOMAC is probably related to the time-dependent measurement feature of the performance-based tests and inadequate inquiry of the functions in the self-evaluation questionnaire [86]. TUG and FO8W represent lower limb function and measure enough time for standing up and walking. We expected the increase in pain sub-score and WOMAC total score to be associated with an increase in the duration of activity of these functional tests, but this correlation was not obtained. This relationship may be dependent on the severity of KOA. It is suggested that

this relationship be investigated using a larger sample size and different severities of KOA.

## 5. Conclusion

Our cross-sectional study showed an inverse correlation between the first and second PKAM and WOMAC pain sub-score and the first PKAM with a total WOMAC score. This result indicates a compensatory mechanism to decrease mechanical loads at greater pain intensity. Also, we did not find a significant correlation between PKFM, KFM impulse, KAM impulse, TUG, and FO8W scores with the WOMAC score. Although it is difficult to interpret the relationship in this cross-sectional study, the results contain a clinical point that the low score on the WOMAC questionnaire in the KOA people should not be attributed to the low level of joint contact forces. Thus, it is better to use these tests together as a complementary tool in studies on people with KOA. Furthermore, future investigations using large sample sizes and different severity of KOA are recommended.

## Limitation

We could not determine the cause-and-effect relationship between the WOMAC questionnaire and the kinet-



ics and functional tests as a cross-sectional study. Our exploratory study is hypothetical rather than definitive. Future studies may yield different findings. Future longitudinal studies are needed to determine the pathomechanics factors underlying the symptoms of knee OA. Mild and severe KOA not included in the study limited the results to be available only to people with grade 2 and 3 KL radiography. It is suggested that this correlation should be investigated in a larger sample at different KOA intensities.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

The research project was ethically approved by **Tarbiat Modares University** (Code: IR.MODARES.REC.1398.004).

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### Authors' contributions

Conceptualization and supervision: Giti Torkaman; Methodology, investigation, writing original draft, review & editing: All authors; Data collection: Samaneh Gholami; Data analysis: Samaneh Gholami, Giti Torkaman and Fariba Bahrami; Funding acquisition and resources: Giti Torkaman.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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