

1 **Establishing outcome measures in early knee osteoarthritis**

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62 **Abstract**

63 The classification and monitoring of individuals with early OA is an important strategy for the design and
64 evaluation of therapeutic interventions. Such an approach requires the identification of appropriate
65 outcomes measures. Potential outcome measures for early OA include patient-reported outcomes (such

66 as measures of pain, function or quality of life), features of clinical examination (such as joint line
67 tenderness and crepitus (that is, grating and crackling sounds)), objective measures of physical function,
68 levels of physical activity, movement biomechanics, structural assessments such as magnetic resonance
69 imaging (MRI) and body fluid biomarkers. Patient characteristics such as adiposity and biomechanics of
70 the knee could also have relevance to early OA. Importantly, future research is needed to enable the
71 selection of outcome measures that are feasible, reliable, and validated in those at risk of OA and an early
72 knee OA population. In this Perspectives paper, potential outcome measures of individuals with early
73 symptomatic knee osteoarthritis (OA) are discussed, including those that could be of use in clinical practice
74 as well as research settings.

75

76 **[H1] Introduction**

77 Osteoarthritis (OA) is a leading cause of chronic pain, disability, and health care utilization, with knee OA
78 contributing the greatest burden¹⁻⁴. OA is associated with increased rates of comorbidity (for example,
79 obesity and heart disease)¹ and ranks the 13th 2 most burdensome amongst all forms of disability world-
80 wide. The incidence and burden of OA is considerable and growing^{3,5}. Therefore, a shift in the treatment
81 approach is needed from treating patients once they have established OA to a proactive approach that
82 focuses on mitigating risk factors. The classification and monitoring of early OA, on a trajectory from
83 normal to symptomatic and/or radiographic OA, would provide an opportunity in clinical practice and
84 research for the development and evaluation of interventions to prevent or slow down the disease process
85 at a time it is probably more amenable to modification.

86 Although the definition of early OA and appropriate outcomes are under development OA is probably
87 heterogeneous in terms of its presentation and progression. Knee OA might progress slowly over a period
88 of ten or more years, rapidly, or not at all⁶. Predicting the development and progression of disease through
89 identifying risk factors and mechanisms of OA is important in chronic disease management to inform
90 targeted OA prevention and treatment strategies. This strategy is difficult because of the heterogeneous

91 presentation of OA; however, the availability of increasingly sophisticated statistical and computational
92 methods, microsimulation modelling, and large population-based cohort studies make this approach
93 increasingly viable. For example, widely-used online prediction tools are now available for evaluating
94 future risk of osteoporotic fractures and for guiding clinicians in preventive management of osteoporosis<sup>7-
95 9</sup>. Comparable reliable and validated outcomes for early OA will inform the evaluation of risk factors for
96 the progression of early OA. More than one set of risk factors and models will probably be needed to
97 predict early OA in the future. The Rotterdam and Chingford studies (two prospective population-based
98 studies) have demonstrated an ability to predict incident radiographic knee OA using a combination of
99 clinical, genetic, and radiographic factors¹⁰. When performing risk assessment and creating a predictive
100 model for early knee OA, many aspects need to be considered: the definitions of the outcome and
101 prognostic factors; the duration of the clinically relevant prediction period; and the setting in which the
102 risk prediction tool will be used (for example, primary care, secondary care or a research setting). For
103 instance, expensive and intensive predictive tools such as MRI scans and biomarkers might be restricted
104 to secondary care and/or a research setting.

105 In this Perspectives article, we highlight considerations for best practice in the selection of outcome
106 measures for use in clinical and research settings to evaluate patients at initial presentation of early knee
107 OA across different outcome domains: patient-reported outcomes, clinical examination, physical function,
108 adiposity, physical activity, nutrition, biomechanical outcomes, imaging features and biochemical markers
109 ¹¹. We suggest outcome measures that could be considered for use in individuals with early knee OA in
110 clinical care and research settings using published evidence (primarily from post-traumatic and established
111 OA populations), emerging evidence (ongoing studies), and clinical expertise (Box 1). The outcome
112 measures highlighted are relevant to individuals that are at risk of OA and fit the provisional criteria for
113 early knee OA based on patient reported outcomes of pain and function, together with clinical signs (joint
114 line tenderness or crepitus) and a radiographic Kellgren-Lawrence (KL) grade of 0-1¹². Although proposed
115 as important evidence-informed clinical outcome measures, these outcome measures will require

116 additional validation and possible modification to suit local primary care and other healthcare settings, as
117 well as periodical updates.

118

119 **Patient-reported outcomes**

120 Patient-reported outcomes are any report of a patient's health status that comes directly from the patient
121 without interpretation by others (for example, the clinician). These measures commonly take the form of
122 a questionnaire. Most relevant patient-reported outcome measures have been developed to either assess
123 individuals with a knee injury (for example, International Knee Documentation Committee 2000
124 (IKDC2000)) or established OA (for example, Western Ontario and McMaster Osteoarthritis Index
125 (WOMAC)); although, one questionnaire has been developed to cover the full spectrum from injury to
126 established OA (the Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS)). The relative merits of these
127 and other available instruments that measure self-reported pain, function, and quality of life have been
128 the subject of previous reviews^{13, 14}. Today measures, such as PROMIS, are often developed using
129 computer adaptive strategies which may also prove to be relevant for use in people with early OA¹⁵. Many
130 of the considerations that influence the choice of measure in established OA (for example, respondent
131 burden, cost or availability) apply also in early OA.

132 Ultra-brief (one or two domains) unidimensional generic measures, such as the 11-point Numerical Rating
133 Scale (NRS-11), the 36-Item short form health survey (SF-36) bodily pain scale (SF-BP 36), have been
134 recommended in previous reviews for established OA¹⁶ and are probably applicable also in early OA.
135 However, the disadvantage of generic health status measures is a restricted view of the pain character and
136 intensity^{16, 17}, which is probably inappropriate based on emerging evidence from qualitative studies in
137 patients with early knee OA¹⁸⁻²⁰. For instance, these patients report that their initial symptoms can be
138 experienced as 'an awareness' of the knee, loss of confidence, or needing to 'be careful' as opposed to
139 'pain'. The KOOS knee-related quality of life subscale includes consideration of questions on these aspects

140 ^{14,15}. Further, reporting OA pain as ‘constant’ or ‘present on most days’ might give floor effects (i.e., most
141 individuals may report at the lower end of the scale) in early OA as these patients often report episodic
142 and intermittent pain with certain activities. For example, pain during ascending or descending stairs
143 seemed to be the earliest functional difficulty reported in the OA initiative²¹. Accordingly, the intermittent
144 and constant assessment of pain score (ICOAP) questionnaire, which includes a subscale on intermittent
145 symptoms, has an increasing amount of evidence supporting its’ reliability and validity.²².

146 Another important consideration is that the early phase of knee OA is often associated with the emergence
147 of adaptive behaviour. Symptom frequency and intensity might be minimized through the selection of
148 behaviours (for example, performing some activities less often), optimization of behaviours (for example,
149 advanced planning of activities, including anticipatory analgesic use), and compensatory adaptations (for
150 example, modifying the way activities are performed)²³. Therefore, consideration of adaptive behaviour is
151 a legitimate topic for outcome measurement in early OA²⁴, an example of which is the Questionnaire to
152 Identify Knee Symptoms (QuIKS). QuIKS includes questions such as “I am considering stopping a favorite
153 activity due to my knees” and “I am considering changing my exercise routine due to my knee problems”²⁵

154 The KOOS was developed for self-reporting of patient-relevant outcomes across the lifespan, from time of
155 knee injury and potential knee OA onset to severe OA²⁶⁻²⁹. In five separate subscales this tool assesses
156 perceived pain and other symptoms (e.g., stiffness, grinding, catching), perceived difficulty with function
157 during daily life and sport and recreational activities, and knee-related quality of life. The KOOS
158 measurement properties have been reported in studies of young, middle-aged, and elderly groups with
159 knee injury or OA, and across the spectrum of treatments¹⁴. A comprehensive literature search identified
160 37 eligible papers evaluating KOOS measurement properties in participants with knee injuries and/or
161 osteoarthritis (OA) and found that KOOS demonstrates adequate content validity, internal consistency,
162 test-retest reliability, construct validity and responsiveness for age- and condition-relevant subscales¹⁴.The
163 KOOS is feasible to administer electronically and in paper form and KOOS scoring instructions and

164 population-based KOOS reference data are available. In addition, longitudinal KOOS data have been
165 collected from more than 100,000 patients in surgical registries of anterior cruciate ligament
166 reconstruction and knee replacement facilitating comparisons to many different populations^{30, 31}. In
167 addition, for the interested researcher, KOOS data are freely available and collected from the cohort of
168 patients who are at increased risk of OA and the cohort of patients with established disease from the NIH-
169 sponsored OA Initiative³². The OA initiative also collects a wide range of other self-reported, clinical and
170 imaging data³². The “at risk “ cohort includes people with symptoms and two or more risk factors (including
171 knee injury) but without radiographic OA³².

172 The ICOAP was designed to evaluate the pain experience in people with OA. It includes pain intensity,
173 frequency, and impact on mood, sleep and quality of life. It is intended to be used alongside a measure of
174 physical function²². OA-specific measures developed for more advanced OA cannot be assumed to have
175 adequate psychometric properties when applied to early OA. Yet, the requirement for adequate
176 performance in early OA must be balanced against the benefits for a coherent evidence base that comes
177 from using common measures across the spectrum from early to advanced OA. Of existing measures, the
178 KOOS and ICOAP seem to best strike this balance and are therefore strong candidates for evaluating early
179 knee OA (Box 1), particularly as these instruments focus on different aspects; both have the advantage of
180 being freely available. Published reviews of the psychometric properties of these two measures require
181 systematic updating with specific attention to their performance in early OA.

182

183 **Clinical examination outcomes**

184 Clinical examination outcomes are relevant in research and are easy to perform in primary care. Joint line
185 tenderness (tibiofemoral and/or patellofemoral joint lines) at baseline was suggested to be a strong
186 predictor of five-year pain progression (moderate progression adjusted OR=3.9 (95% CI; 2.3 - 6.6)³³ in the
187 CHECK cohort (n=705) that included patients with newly onset knee pain or stiffness³⁴. Several studies

188 have evaluated the ability of physical signs to predict the clinical onset of structural radiographic OA in
189 patients with an increased risk of OA³³⁻³⁷. Data from the HONEUR Study, which included 549 participants
190 who were recruited at the first presentation of knee pain in primary care, suggested that joint line
191 tenderness, crepitus (that is, grating, crackling, popping sounds), pain with passive flexion, and a self-
192 reported swollen knee predicted incident radiographic tibiofemoral knee OA after 6 years³⁵. Using MRI
193 features of knee OA as an outcome measure, data from the general population Rotterdam Study showed
194 that joint line tenderness together with the 'feeling of giving way' were associated with the incidence of
195 tibiofemoral knee OA, whereas crepitus was identified as a good predictor of patellofemoral OA^{36, 37}.

196 Easily assessable measures from physical examination might be associated with future OA development,
197 including joint line tenderness and crepitus, even in the absence of radiologic findings of OA (Box 1).
198 Clinical examination of these features had good inter-observer reliability in a population with evident knee
199 osteoarthritis if a standardised approach to such assessment is used³⁸. However, these clinical assessment
200 components require further examination of reliability and validation for research settings in early knee OA
201 and standardization for use in clinical settings.

202 **Physical function outcomes**

203 Given that the early pre-radiographic stage of OA is associated with intermittent symptoms and adaptive
204 physical behaviour, the clinical evaluation of patients with, or at risk of, early knee OA should incorporate
205 robust outcome measures of physical function³⁹. Currently, no consensus exists regarding which outcomes
206 are most relevant for use in this population. For the purposes of this Perspective article, physical function
207 is operationally defined as 'physiological functions' or 'the ability to move around and to perform daily
208 activities' that can be classified as 'body functions and structure' or 'activities and participation',
209 respectively, using the World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, Disability and
210 Health (ICF) model⁴⁰. As physical function is multi-dimensional, both performance-based and physical
211 impairment measures (which might require specialized pieces of equipment and raters) are discussed in

212 this section. Emerging evidence suggest that some of these outcome measures might be suitable for the
213 evaluation of early OA and those at risk of OA (Table 1)⁴¹⁻⁴⁶.

214 A range of performance-based measures are available although the degree to which their measurement properties
215 are established and the range of populations they have been used in varies (Table 1). Measures that have
216 undergone fairly extensive investigation include the Single Leg Hop for distance test^{43, 44, 47-50}, the Cross Hop for
217 distance^{43, 47-50}, the 6-meter Timed Hop Test^{43, 47-50}, the Star Excursion and similar Y-balance test^{44, 51-55}, the 30-
218 second Chair Sit-to-Stand Test⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸, and the 6-minute walk test^{41, 42}, while there is emerging evidence for the Vertical
219 Drop Jump^{44, 59}, the Single Leg Squat^{44, 60-62}, Unipedal Dynamic Balance test^{44, 63} and 20-meter Shuttle Run^{44, 64}. The
220 most commonly reported outcome of physical impairment is quadriceps muscle strength^{44, 47, 48, 51, 65}, however,
221 there might also be value in considering the strength of other lower extremity muscles including the hamstring, hip
222 abductor and hip adductor muscle; although, insufficient information is available to advocate for specific
223 contraction mode (i.e., isotonic, isokinetic or isometric) or type (i.e., concentric or eccentric).

224 Because of floor and ceiling effects (i.e., most individuals report a minimum – floor, or maximum – ceiling
225 score), separate measures are required to cover the wide range of ages and abilities of patients with early
226 knee OA in both clinical and research settings. Functional outcomes that should be considered for use in
227 research and in clinical physical and exercise therapy practice based on their measurement properties and
228 ability to span the full spectrum of patient age and abilities include the Single Leg Hop for distance, 30-
229 second Chair Sit-to-Stand Test, 6-minute walk test and a quadriceps strength measure. The performance-
230 based outcomes should be administered in a standardized, validated and reproducible fashion to enable
231 detection of change over time; video demonstrations and explicit instructions for standardized testing are
232 available online (see related links). Further research validating functional outcomes in ‘at risk’ (e.g., intra-
233 articular knee injury, obesity, varus/valgus alignment abnormality) and ‘early-OA’ populations is required
234 and this research should inform the periodic updating of these suggested functional outcomes.

235

236 **Modifiable lifestyle-related outcomes**

237 The presence of modifiable risk factors related to lifestyle, such as obesity, dietary inadequacies, and
238 physical inactivity might lead to accelerated disease onset and progression through a combination of
239 mechanical and systemic mechanisms⁶⁶. Identifying these modifiable risk factors in early knee OA is
240 important for the prevention of OA.

241 Several measures of adiposity or weight have been studied in established OA, but less so in early OA. These
242 include BMI, waist-height ratio (WHR) and waist circumference⁶⁷⁻⁷¹. The location of fat depots influences
243 their metabolic and inflammatory potential and therefore may be important considerations. A high waist-
244 height ratio or waist circumference (indicative of abdominal adiposity) were associated with an increased
245 risk of OA progression⁷¹; however, neither outcome was associated with the loss of tibial or patellar
246 cartilage volume or defects in adults in the community with pre-radiographic OA^{72,73}. To detect a change
247 in visceral fat at this early stage, more accurate assessments of abdominal adiposity are needed.
248 Measurements of fat mass (kg), percentage fat mass (percentage of total mass) and fat mass index (FMI;
249 fat mass/height²), can be obtained using dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry or bioelectrical impedance
250 analysis, hence permitting a direct measure of adiposity⁷⁴. Total fat mass is positively associated with an
251 increased risk of knee cartilage defects and the presence of bone marrow lesions in healthy individuals
252 (aged 25-60 years)⁷⁵ and medial tibiofemoral cartilage volume loss over 2-10 years in adults aged 51-81
253 years^{76,77}. A systematic review reported moderate evidence for the relationship between obesity (that is,
254 increasing weight, BMI or total body fat mass) and the presence of bone marrow lesions in the knee in
255 individuals with OA⁷⁰. In addition to contributing to an increased mechanical load, adiposity is thought to
256 have a metabolic and pro-inflammatory function in OA; therefore, a direct measure of adiposity (fat mass,
257 percentage fat mass or FMI) rather than BMI, might be more useful in the assessment of early-stage OA⁷⁸⁻
258 ⁸¹.

259 Physical activity is a modifiable outcome that might delay the onset of functional limitation, prevent
260 obesity, and is essential for normal joint health⁸². In addition, physical activity can reduce pain and

261 disability among individuals with OA and increase their physical performance and self-efficacy⁸³⁻⁸⁵. Light or
262 moderate intensity physical activity might protect against the onset of disability related to symptomatic
263 OA, whereas a sedentary lifestyle or levels of strenuous physical activity is considered a risk factor⁸⁶⁻⁸⁸.
264 Many variations of self-reported measures of physical activity exist including global or short recall
265 questionnaires, although most have limited accuracy⁸⁶⁻⁸⁸. Wearable monitors that measure body motion
266 can be used to assess physical activity and energy expenditure. The most commonly used sensor, validated
267 across multiple populations, is an accelerometer (for example, Actigraph)⁸⁹, which captures frequency,
268 intensity, and duration of physical activity in a time-stamped manner. The large selection of off-the-shelf
269 accelerometers, often contained in mobile phones, might be more suitable in a primary care setting to
270 measure physical activity as they are less expensive, easier to use and widely available^{90, 91}. Most
271 accelerometers, however, are not validated to measure cycling or swimming. In general, objective
272 measures of physical activity such as accelerometer outcomes compared with self-reporting have stronger
273 relationships with function in OA⁹² and are a more accurate assessment of physical activity and sedentary
274 lifestyle.

275 Nutrition interventions such as weight loss^{93, 94} are lifestyle-related changes that can potentially improve
276 OA symptoms. Beyond the link between obesity and knee OA (and therefore the important contribution
277 of weight loss)^{95, 96}, the contribution of nutritional factors is an emerging and important area of research,
278 although limited clinical evidence is available to date. For example, low dietary intakes of fibre⁹⁷ or omega-
279 3 polyunsaturated fatty acids⁹⁸, and high fat diets⁹⁹ are risk factors for OA and/or worsening of pain in OA
280 and might therefore warrant monitoring in early OA. Many of the nutrients or dietary patterns tested to
281 date probably contribute to pathology via alterations in body weight or inflammation, although the direct
282 effects of these factors requires further investigation. The tools to monitor dietary intake are numerous
283 (for example, the Food Frequency Questionnaire (FFQ), 24-hour dietary recall (either the paper-based or
284 web-based automated self-administered 24-hour dietary recall (ASA24) assessment tools¹⁰⁰) and the 3-

285 day or 7-day weighed food record) and need to be assessed for each clinical or research setting. In addition,
286 tools to assess adherence to diets that reduce inflammation such as the Mediterranean Diet Adherence
287 Screener¹⁰¹ might also warrant use in future.

288 Hence, objective measures of adiposity are desirable. BMI is a useful outcome measure for assessing
289 adiposity in a primary clinical setting because of its familiarity, validity, and reference ranges. However,
290 BMI has limitations for use in young athletes. Although weight loss can improve OA symptoms, further
291 research is needed to identify a means of assessing important OA-related nutritional factors. Assessment
292 of physical activity using a validated accelerometer, to accurately capture activity through each domain
293 and intensity, is a promising area that requires future study.

294

295 **Biomechanical outcomes**

296 Biomechanical outcomes are measures of joint mechanics typically collected in a research setting, but
297 sometimes taken in a primary care setting. Joint mechanics can be employed to assess OA severity, but
298 also for understanding the causes of OA onset and progression. For example, altered joint mechanics
299 following knee injury might contribute to the onset and development of post-traumatic OA³⁹. Indirect
300 evidence to support this concept comes from observations of altered joint movement, loading, and muscle
301 activation patterns following injury¹⁰²⁻¹⁰⁷, with radiographic knee OA (KL \geq 2)¹⁰⁸⁻¹¹⁰, with aging^{111, 112} and pre
302 and post joint arthroplasty¹¹³⁻¹¹⁵. Abnormal joint alignment^{116, 117}, alteration of the external knee adduction
303 moment (KAM) and increased varus alignment are often regarded as indicators of altered joint mechanics
304 associated with increased OA severity¹¹⁰. However, joint mechanics in OA might also change because of
305 other factors including loss of dynamic joint stability^{118, 119}, muscle atrophy¹²⁰, neuromuscular inhibition¹²¹,
306 muscle weakness,¹²²⁻¹²⁴ and compensatory muscle activation mechanisms^{108, 109, 114}. These changes might
307 alter cartilage loading and contact mechanics. Indeed, some studies indicate changes in tibiofemoral
308 cartilage contact locations^{39, 125}, elongated path lengths¹²⁶, force magnitudes^{103, 127, 128}, and deformations¹²⁵,

309 ¹²⁶ are associated with OA onset and progression. In turn, OA progression might be caused by progressive
310 degradation of cartilage through interactions of articular movement and cartilage loading abnormalities,
311 chronic inflammation, resultant tissue remodelling, and other OA risk factors by increasing the
312 susceptibility of cartilage and subchondral bone to damage and degradation at regions inadequately
313 adapted to these altered loads^{125, 129-133}. Over time, this process might result in altered cartilage thicknesses
314 and clinically relevant cartilage thinning in different regions of the articular cartilage surfaces. To verify
315 this mechanism, longitudinal data are needed of the joint mechanics, cartilage thickness, and cartilage
316 structure and integrity in OA^{134, 135}. Integration of this information with other risk factors for OA-related
317 changes might inform the development of novel patient-specific, diagnostic or predictive models to aid in
318 early patient screening, intervention efficacy monitoring, and the development of new therapeutics^{127, 128,}
319 ^{130, 136, 137}. Armed with these data and models, new wearable monitors might enable biomechanical
320 outcomes assessment in the clinic and community^{131-133, 138, 139}, and might provide the possibility of
321 developing and monitoring personalized treatment plans.

322 Presently, the joint range of motion is a suggested measure that could be collected in a primary care setting
323 to assess OA severity. The other biomechanical outcomes mentioned above (e.g., KAM, kinematics,
324 electromyography, cartilage loading) although used to understand the mechanisms of OA progression
325 and currently not feasibly collected in most clinical settings, are an important component for consideration
326 in research settings to inform orthotics design, exercise interventions, bracing, and surgical interventions.
327 In the future, validated wearable monitors might help assess biomechanical outcomes of early
328 interventions in the clinic and community. Evidence suggests that outcome measures are not independent
329 but rather variation in one outcome measure (for example, biomechanical outcomes) can influence the
330 quantitative state of another measure (for example, biomarkers or imaging outcomes)¹⁴⁰⁻¹⁴⁴. Thus, future
331 research should consider the interaction between different outcome measures to potentially increase the
332 sensitivity of detecting early OA^{129, 141}.

333

334 **Imaging outcomes**

335 Osteoarthritis is a complex syndrome that at the local level, is best characterised as a whole joint disease
336 involving multiple tissue pathologies. In attempting to characterise and monitor the variety of OA
337 structural components a number of different imaging modalities have been used-the most common
338 amongst these being x-ray, ultrasound and MRI. This section will predominantly focus on plain
339 radiography and MRI, as ultrasound has a number of limitations that have constrained its development
340 and validity in this area including observer dependency and an inability to adequately image weight-
341 bearing portions of the joint.

342 Radiographic features of OA are generally classified by the Kellgren and Lawrence (KL) grading system¹⁴⁵
343 and include joint space narrowing, osteophyte formation, sclerosis, and deformity of bony contours¹⁴⁶.
344 Minimum radiographic joint space width (JSW) is the gold standard recommended by the FDA for detecting
345 structural changes in patients with knee OA in clinical trials. Standardized measures of radiographic
346 positioning and fixed location JSW can reach the same degree of responsiveness as quantitative measures
347 of cartilage thickness on MRI ¹⁴⁷. However, radiographic features such as loss of joint space, sclerosis, and
348 deformity of bone are associated with late-stage OA and are preceded and detected with greater
349 sensitivity by MRI.

350 Conventional MRI enables the evaluation of morphological changes related to early OA, including but not
351 limited to cartilage damage, meniscal damage, synovitis, presence of BMLs, and ligamentous damage. In
352 one study of patients with knee pain (n=255, age 40-79 years), BMLs were present in 11% of individuals
353 without radiographic OA (KL = 0), 38% of individuals with pre-radiographic OA (KL = 1) and 71% of
354 individuals with radiographic OA (KL >2)^{148, 149}. Similarly, 42% of patients with a diagnosis of symptomatic
355 OA without radiographic features (KL < 2) had BMLs and 57% had cartilage loss¹⁵⁰. Although a paucity of
356 data exists regarding the timeline of structural changes in the period between a joint injury sustained in

357 youth and the onset of clinical post-traumatic OA, advanced MRI techniques have been used to detect
358 subtle cartilage damage at the time of ACL injury¹⁵¹. Furthermore, macroscopic cartilaginous changes, the
359 presence of BMLs, and bone morphology changes might be detectable by conventional MRI techniques
360 as early as two years post ACL reconstruction or other intra-articular knee injury (and potentially before
361 the development of radiographic OA)^{6, 152-155}.

362 In 2011, a definition of MRI-defined OA was proposed to facilitate earlier detection of OA (Box 2)^{156, 157}. In
363 one study of patients who had undergone anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction, 19% and 17%
364 of the participants met the MRI criteria for tibiofemoral and patellofemoral OA, respectively, at 1 year¹⁵⁸.
365 Importantly, some of the changes included in this criteria are undetectable by radiography (i.e. cartilage
366 thickness, bone marrow lesions). Different methodologies can be used to measure structural changes in
367 the knee by MRI including the use of semi-quantitative measures (such as the MRI Osteoarthritis Knee
368 Score (MOAKS)), quantitative measures (including cartilage thickness, bone marrow lesion volume,
369 effusion-synovitis volume and meniscal extrusion) and measures obtained using compositional imaging
370 modalities of cartilage (including T2 mapping, T1ρ mapping, delayed gadolinium-enhanced MRI of cartilage
371 (dGEMRIC), sodium MRI and glycosaminoglycan chemical exchange saturation transfer (gagCEST)) which
372 measure cartilage composition and quality¹⁵⁹. Semiquantitative MRI evaluation can be performed using
373 several available scoring systems such as the MRI Osteoarthritis Knee Score (MOAKS) and the Anterior
374 Cruciate Ligament Osteoarthritis Score (ACLOAS)^{148, 160}. For synovitis assessment, contrast-enhanced MRI
375 should be used and semi-quantitative scoring systems based on contrast-enhanced MRI are available to
376 enable clear delineation of the synovium from effusion¹⁶¹. In population-based studies, a high proportion
377 of radiographically normal knees have osteophytes and cartilage damage detectable by MRI illustrating
378 the greater sensitivity of MRI as compared to radiography¹⁴⁹. However, it also highlights the challenge of
379 what is to be regarded as osteoarthritic disease and what is part of a normally ageing joint¹⁶². The link
380 between anatomical evidence of OA and patients' symptoms and function is still rather weak^{163, 164}.

381 Ultimately, the presence of these findings on MRI require validation by longitudinal follow-up studies to
382 identify their association with subsequent illness related to OA (alteration of patient function and
383 symptoms)¹⁶⁵ to avoid over-diagnosis because of incidental MRI findings^{148, 149, 166-168}. Notably, the
384 distinction between pathology and normal features of the ageing joint is unclear and further research to
385 elucidate the importance of MRI findings in early knee OA is warranted.

386 Hence, the utility of plain radiography in early OA is limited as only relatively late OA changes are
387 detectable. As technology improves, assessing changes in bone shape or trabecular bone texture of sub-
388 chondral bone might be of use. MRI has superior sensitivity to change and validity in the context of early
389 OA. Although not appropriate for all primary care settings because of the high cost and risk of over-
390 diagnosis, MRI is a critical component of ongoing outcome validation research in early knee OA.

391

392 **Biomarker outcomes**

393 Some laboratory OA biomarkers detectable in blood, urine or synovial fluid are associated with or
394 predictive of incident radiographic knee OA. Biomarkers of joint tissue turnover can reflect disease-
395 relevant biological activity that might not otherwise be apparent before structural changes are detectable
396 by MRI or plain radiography. Ideally, biomarkers of early OA must clearly differentiate between normal
397 (physiological) and pathological tissue turnover as well as between the early stages of the disease and
398 more advanced joint destruction. The biomarkers must also be unaffected by other disorders and be easily
399 measured in a clinical setting¹⁶⁹. Biomarkers of early OA might also be used to identify pre-radiographic
400 changes at the molecular level and facilitate OA drug discovery, and potentially enable a more rational and
401 personalized approach to healthcare OA management by prompting earlier and more targeted treatment
402 ¹⁷⁰.

403 Studies of incident OA have identified some of the earliest molecular abnormalities associated with OA
404 and therefore provide biomarker candidates for early OA identification. 10 years prior to radiographic

405 hand or knee OA, four serum proteins (matrix metalloproteinase-7, IL-15, plasminogen activator
406 inhibitor-1 and soluble vascular adhesion protein-1) were altered in a cohort of patients with OA
407 compared with healthy individuals¹⁷¹. Similarly, serum COMP (sCOMP) and hyaluronan concentrations
408 could predict¹⁷² incident knee joint space narrowing and osteophyte (sCOMP) formation 7 years later in
409 another patient cohort. In another study, incident radiographic knee OA over ten years was positively
410 predicted by serum COMP concentration (based on KL scores) at baseline but negatively predicted by
411 serum aggrecan concentration¹⁷³. Furthermore, mean baseline serum osteocalcin concentrations levels
412 are associated with 3-year incident radiographic hand OA (KL >2) but not knee OA in pre-menopausal
413 and peri-menopausal women¹⁷⁴. Bioactive lipids are also potential biomarkers of pain and inflammation
414 ¹⁷⁵ and metabolomics has been used to identify metabolic profiles that can differentiate between
415 synovium samples from patients with OA and healthy individuals¹⁷⁶.

416 In 2006, the NIH-funded OA Biomarkers Network and the OARSI Clinical Trials Biomarkers Working group
417 proposed a new classification system for OA biomarkers termed BIPEDS^{177, 178}. The purpose of this
418 classification was to clarify the intended primary use of the biomarker to reflect Burden of OA disease,
419 Investigative, Prognostic for OA development, Efficacy of OA intervention, Diagnostic for OA and Safety of
420 intervention biomarkers) classification system for OA biomarkers^{172,173}. However, a systematic review
421 performed in 2010 concluded that individual biochemical markers and categories of biochemical markers,
422 including their nature, origin and metabolism, need further investigation and validation¹⁷⁹. In 2016, the
423 FDA-NIH Biomarker Working Group proposed the development of the BEST (Biomarkers, Endpoints, and
424 other Tools) resource¹⁸⁰. The BEST resource is a glossary that aims to distinguish between biomarkers and
425 clinical assessments and to describe the distinct functions of biomarkers in biomedical research, clinical
426 practice, and medical product development. BEST can be used to test, validate, and commercialize a
427 biomarker to be used in clinical drug testing trials, and might also be used for improving biomarker
428 development for early OA.

429 The profiling of biological fluids (for example, serum and synovial fluid) and joint tissues can provide a
430 global view of the physiologic state of an OA joint. Refinements in omics approaches and advances in
431 analytical techniques will enable improved profiling of different stages of disease. To be clinically useful
432 these biomarkers need to be properly qualified (that is, a process needs to link a biomarker with other
433 biological, biomechanical and clinical outcomes) for early OA and they must adhere to the BEST guidelines
434 to be effectively used in a clinical setting, rather than in an exploratory and research setting.

435 Soluble biomarkers require further study, validation, and qualification as susceptibility or risk outcomes
436 for the development of early OA before being adopted for widespread use in the clinical care setting. Their
437 contextualized evaluation in all OA research studies is encouraged.

438

439 **Conclusions**

440 Various outcome domains exist that could be assessed for patients with early knee OA in research and/or
441 clinical settings, including patient-reported outcomes, clinical features, measures of physical function,
442 adiposity, physical activity or nutrition and biomechanical, imaging, or biochemical markers. Promising
443 patient reported outcomes for this purpose include the KOOS and the ICOAP. Measures of physical
444 outcomes (for example, single leg hop, quadriceps strength) and fat mass index (DXA) are also valid and
445 reliable. With increasing popularity worldwide, a validated wearable physical activity monitor for
446 quantifying levels of physical activity and a 3-day weighed food record for nutritional intake (for example,
447 calories) has potential. MRI-defined OA and biomarkers, although promising, require specific healthcare
448 and research settings where these outcomes are possible to collect. Additional considerations of patient-
449 preferences and psychosocial outcomes are also important in future research examining early knee OA
450 outcome measures¹⁸¹. In this regard, further patient-engaged research is recommended.

451 Importantly, multiple factors must be considered to facilitate risk assessment and the development of
452 predictive models for early knee OA. Furthermore, definitions are needed for the potential outcomes,

453 exposures, confounding and effect-modifying variables, duration of the clinically relevant prediction
454 period and the setting in which the risk prediction tool will be used. As such, further research validating
455 outcomes in individuals 'at risk' of early OA progression (for example, individuals with an intra-articular
456 knee injury and/or who are obese) and 'early-OA' populations is required.

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941

942 **Acknowledgements**

943 The authors acknowledge the financial support of Alberta Team OA (Alberta Innovates Health Solutions
944 Collaborative Research and Innovation Opportunity Team) and Arthritis Research UK who funded an initial
945 meeting at Osteoarthritis Research Society International to discuss outcomes in early OA. The support of
946 Osteoarthritis Research Society International is acknowledged for meeting room facilities. The authors
947 would like to thank Tanya Childs for the administrative support in completing this manuscript.

948

949 **Author contributions**

950 “CAE, JLW, NKA, AMa, LSL, EMR, KLB, CMT, RAR, DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM,
951 MAR, AMo, AG, DJH, NKA researched data for the article. CAE, JLW, NKA, AMa, LSL, EMR, KLB, CMT, RAR,
952 DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM, MAR, AMo, AG, DJH, NKA provided substantial
953 contributions to discussion of content. CAE, JLW, NKA, AMa, LSL, and FPL wrote the article and CAE, JLW,
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956 **Competing Interests**

957 CAE, JLW, AMa, NKA, KLB, CMT, RAR, DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM, MAR, AMo,

958 AG, and DJH declare that they have no competing interests. E.M.R. and L.S.L declare that they contributed to
959 the development of the Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS). L.S.L. also declares that he
960 contributed to the development of the ICOAP and the Anterior Cruciate Ligament Osteoarthritis Score (ACLOAS).

961

962 Related links

963 KOOS scoring instructions: <http://www.koos.nu/>

964 Single Leg Hop for distance: <https://www.sralab.org/rehabilitation-measures/single-limb-hop-tests>

965 30-second Chair Sit-to-Stand Test: <https://vimeo.com/74649743>

966 6-minute walk test: <https://vimeo.com/74649737>

Box 1. Proposed outcomes for the assessment of early pre-radiographic OA

Below we provide suggestions for outcomes measures that could be used to assess individuals with early pre-radiographic OA in clinical practice and in research settings. Further research is needed, including evaluation of validity of early-OA specific outcomes and change in outcomes with progression of OA as many of these measures have been evaluated primarily in established OA.

In clinical practice and research settings:

Patient-reported outcomes

The Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS) can be used to measure pain during activity, other symptoms (e.g., stiffness, grinding, catching, swelling, knee flexion and extension) , function in daily life and during sport and recreational activities, and quality of life across different age and treatment groups. The intermittent and constant assessment of pain score (ICOAP) can evaluate constant and intermittent pain.

Clinical examination

A clinical assessment including joint line tenderness should be performed on individuals with newly-onset symptoms of knee pain, stiffness, crepitus, or a feeling of 'giving way'.

Functional outcomes

Three measures seem promising for use in clinical settings on the basis of their reproducibility, patient acceptability and the equipment and expertise required: Single leg hop test, 30 second chair sit-to-stand and quadriceps strength measure. Multiple additional functional measures have been validated for use in research settings.

Lifestyle-related outcomes

Adiposity can be assessed by body fat percentage or fat mass index (fat mass/height²) using dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry or bioelectrical impedance analysis if available. BMI is more feasible in clinical settings, although has limitations for use in athletes. Levels of physical activity can be assessed using a validated physical activity monitor or a validated questionnaire if objective methods are not available. Nutrition outcomes are not currently suggested for use in routine clinical care, however the 3-day dietary record provides reliable estimates of nutrient intake.

In research settings only:

Biomechanical outcomes

Measures of biomechanical outcomes require further research and are not currently suggested for use in routine clinical care. However, such outcomes are ideal for informing the underlying mechanisms of OA progression and informing treatment interventions in research setting.

Imaging outcomes

The utility of plain radiography in early OA is limited. Although MRI has superior sensitivity to change and validity in the context of early OA, and is hence ideal in research settings, MRI is not thought appropriate for the routine clinical care setting because of the high cost and potential risk of over-diagnosis.

Biomarkers

No biomarkers are currently of use in routine clinical care; however, further validation of proteomic, lipidomic and metabolomic tools in research settings could lead to informative cartilage and synovial fluid profiles and provide important insights into OA progression.

Commented [CE1]: Thought of others on this addition?

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Table 1. Important physical function outcomes

Outcome measure	Test measure	Equipment Required	Reliability			Error	Validity		Responsive /Interpretability	Appropriate risk group (age)	References
			Intra	Inter	Re-test		Struct-ural	Ho testing			
Single leg hop for distance	Length (cm)	Measuring tape	+	-	-	-	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	43, 44, 47-50
Cross hop for distance	Length (cm)	Measuring tape	+	-	-	-	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	40,44-4
6 meter timed hop test	Time (sec)	Measuring tape	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	43, 47-50
Star excursion balance test	Length (% leg length)	Measuring mat, measuring tape and skilled rater (leg length)	+	+	+	+	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	44, 51-55
30-second chair sit-to-stand test	Count	Chair and timer	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	53-55
6 minute walk test	Length (m)	Flat 20m walking area, timer and chair	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Obese (all ages)	41, 42
Vertical drop jump	Risk rating	31cm high box	+	+	-	-	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	44, 59
Single leg squat	Risk rating	None	+	+	-	-	+/-	+/-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	44, 60-62
Unipedal dynamic balance	Time (sec)	Balance pad and timer	-	+	+	-	+	+	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	41,61
20 meter shuttle run	Stage	Coloured tape and instructions.	-	-	+	+	-/+	+	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	41,61
Quadriceps strength	Force (Nm/Kg)	Hand-held or isokinetic dynamometer and skilled rater	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	44, 47, 48, 51, 65
Hamstring strength	Force (Nm/Kg)	Hand-held or isokinetic dynamometer and skilled rater	+	+	+	+	+/-	+/-	+/-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	41,43

Hip adductor or hip abductor strength	Force (Nm/Kg)	Hand-held or isokinetic dynamometer and skilled rater	+	+	+	+	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	41,43	977
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983 + = supporting evidence, - = no supporting evidence, +/- = conflicting evidence,

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Box 2 MRI-defined osteoarthritis⁹²

Tibio-femoral MRI-defined osteoarthritis (OA) is based on identifying the following MRI features in the medial or lateral tibio-femoral compartment:

- Definite osteophyte AND full thickness cartilage loss

Or

- Definite osteophyte OR full thickness cartilage loss AND at least two of the following:
 - Sub-chondral bone marrow lesion not associated with meniscal or ligamentous attachment.
 - Meniscal subluxation (for example, meniscal extrusion), maceration or degeneration (including horizontal tear).
 - Partial thickness cartilage loss where full-thickness loss was not present.
 - Bone attrition in one of the tibiofemoral (medial or lateral) or patellofemoral joint compartments respectively.

Mixed Tibio-femoral MRI-defined OA is based on meeting some of the above features in one compartment and others in a second compartment.

Patellofemoral MRI-defined OA is based on identifying a definite osteophyte and partial or full-thickness cartilage loss in the patellofemoral compartment

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