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EVALUATING THE EFFICACY OF METFORMIN IN MANAGING KNEE OSTEOARTHRITIS AMONG OBESE INDIVIDUALS

Varshini S.*[1], Dr. K. Karthickeyan[2] and Dr. P. Shanmuga Sundaram[3]

[1]M.Pharm II Year, Department of Pharmacy Practice, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, VISTAS.
[2]Professor and Head, Department of Pharmacy Practice, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, VISTAS.
[3]Dean, Department of Pharmaceutical Sciences, VISTAS.

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***Corresponding Author: Varshini S.**
M.Pharm II Year, Department of Pharmacy Practice, School of Pharmaceutical Sciences, VISTAS.
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ABSTRACT

Knee osteoarthritis (OA) is a long-term, degenerative joint disease that is aggravated by obesity through both mechanical and metabolic stress. Conventional OA therapy targets symptom improvement with little effect on the course of the disease. Metformin, a first- line antidiabetic medication, has been identified as a potential disease-modifying treatment for obese patients with knee OA because it possesses anti-inflammatory, chondroprotective, and weight-reducing effects. This review discusses the mechanisms through which metformin yields positive effects on OA, such as the activation of AMP- activated protein kinase (AMPK), suppression of pro-inflammatory cytokines like IL-6 and TNF-α, lowering of oxidative stress, and enhancement of cartilage homeostasis. Clinical and preclinical data exist for its ability to alleviate pain, maintain joint integrity, and retard the requirement for surgery. Although promising, more large-scale, randomized controlled trials are needed to define metformin's place in OA management. Metformin is a safe, affordable, and widely available adjunctive therapy that may help the increasingly large population of obese OA patients in meaningful ways.

KEYWORDS: Metformin, Knee osteoarthritis, Obesity, AMPK activation, Anti- inflammatory.

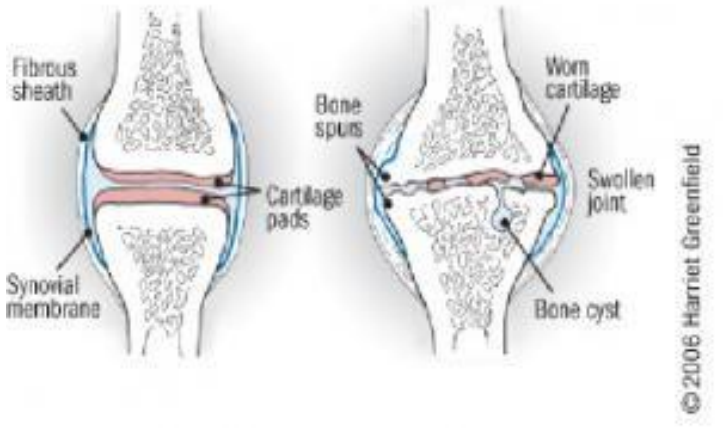
INTRODUCTION

Knee osteoarthritis (OA) is a chronic degenerative joint disease that significantly affects mobility and quality of life, particularly in obese individuals. It is characterized by progressive cartilage degradation, synovial inflammation, osteophyte formation, and subchondral bone remodeling. Among various risk factors, obesity plays a crucial role in the pathogenesis and progression of OA.

The excessive mechanical load exerted on weight-bearing joints due to increased body mass leads to structural deterioration of the knee joint. Additionally, obesity is associated with a state of chronic low-grade inflammation, where pro-inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) contribute to cartilage breakdown and pain sensitization. Given the rising prevalence of obesity worldwide, there is an urgent need for effective therapeutic strategies to manage knee OA in this patient population.

Conventional treatment options for knee OA primarily focus on symptom relief rather than disease modification. Nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), corticosteroid injections, and physical therapy are commonly prescribed to alleviate pain and improve function. However, these approaches do not halt disease progression and may pose significant side effects, especially in obese individuals who are already at risk for metabolic disorders and cardiovascular complications.

Surgical interventions, such as total knee replacement, remain the last resort for end-stage OA but come with substantial risks, including prolonged recovery and reduced long-term success in obese patients. Therefore, the search for alternative pharmacological agents that can address both the inflammatory and metabolic aspects of OA has gained increasing attention.



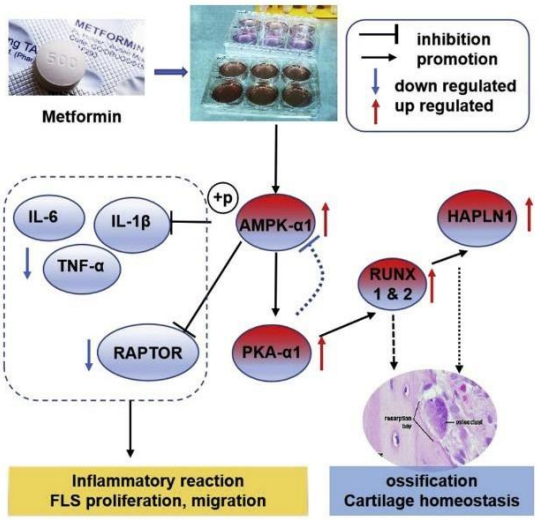
Metformin, a widely used oral antihyperglycemic agent for type 2 diabetes mellitus, has recently emerged as a potential therapeutic option for obese knee OA patients. Beyond its well- established role in glucose metabolism, metformin has demonstrated anti-inflammatory, chondroprotective, and weight-modulating effects, which could be beneficial in managing OA. Studies suggest that metformin activates AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK), a key cellular energy sensor that influences cartilage homeostasis and inflammatory pathways. Given its favorable safety profile and affordability, metformin presents an intriguing candidate for OA treatment. This article aims to explore the effects of metformin on knee OA in obese individuals, focusing on its mechanisms of action, clinical efficacy, and future implications in the management of this debilitating condition.

MECHANISMS OF METFORMIN IN KNEE OSTEOARTHRITIS

Metformin exerts its effects on knee osteoarthritis (OA) through multiple interconnected pathways that address both metabolic and inflammatory contributors to disease progression. One of the primary mechanisms through which metformin may benefit obese knee OA patients is its strong anti-inflammatory action. Chronic low-grade inflammation, commonly observed in obesity, plays a crucial role in OA pathogenesis by accelerating cartilage degradation and

promoting synovial inflammation. Metformin has been shown to inhibit the production of pro- inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), which are responsible for cartilage destruction and joint pain. By downregulating these inflammatory mediators, metformin helps to reduce synovitis and slow the progression of joint damage.

Another key mechanism by which metformin exerts its beneficial effects in OA is through the activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK). AMPK is a critical cellular energy sensor that plays a vital role in maintaining cartilage homeostasis. Activation of AMPK by metformin has been shown to enhance chondrocyte survival by inhibiting catabolic enzymes such as matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs) and aggrecanases, which are responsible for breaking down cartilage extracellular matrix components. Additionally, AMPK activation promotes anabolic pathways, stimulating the synthesis of collagen and proteoglycans necessary for cartilage repair and maintenance. By restoring the balance between cartilage degradation and regeneration, metformin may help preserve joint integrity in obese OA patients.



Beyond its direct effects on inflammation and cartilage metabolism, metformin also influences oxidative stress, which is a significant contributor to OA progression. Oxidative stress damages chondrocytes and synovial cells, leading to increased apoptosis and further joint degradation. Metformin has been reported to reduce oxidative stress by enhancing mitochondrial function and promoting antioxidant defenses, thereby protecting joint tissues from damage. Furthermore, metformin's ability to improve insulin sensitivity and facilitate weight loss may provide additional benefits by reducing excessive mechanical stress on the knee joint, which is a major factor in OA exacerbation. Given these multifaceted effects, metformin represents a promising therapeutic option for obese individuals with knee OA, targeting both the metabolic and inflammatory components of the disease.

CLINICAL EVIDENCE AND STUDIES

The potential role of metformin in knee osteoarthritis (OA), particularly in obese individuals, has gained attention due to emerging clinical and preclinical studies. Several observational studies and randomized controlled trials have examined the effects of metformin on OA progression, pain reduction, and functional improvement. One notable study investigated the association between metformin use and the need for total knee replacement in patients with OA.

The findings suggested that individuals who used metformin had a significantly lower risk of undergoing knee replacement surgery compared to non-users, indicating a potential disease- modifying effect. This observation is crucial, as current OA treatments primarily focus on symptom management rather than altering disease progression.

In a randomized controlled trial evaluating metformin's effectiveness in knee OA patients with obesity, participants receiving metformin demonstrated improvements in pain scores and physical function when compared to those in the placebo group. The study highlighted that metformin's benefits were not solely attributed to weight reduction but also to its direct anti- inflammatory and chondroprotective properties. Moreover, knee joint MRI scans of metformin users revealed a slower rate of cartilage volume loss, further supporting its potential role in preserving joint integrity. Another clinical investigation involving patients with OA and type 2 diabetes reported that metformin users exhibited lower levels of inflammatory markers, including C-reactive protein (CRP) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), which are known to contribute to OA progression. These findings suggest that metformin's systemic anti-inflammatory effects may extend beyond glucose regulation and contribute to joint health.

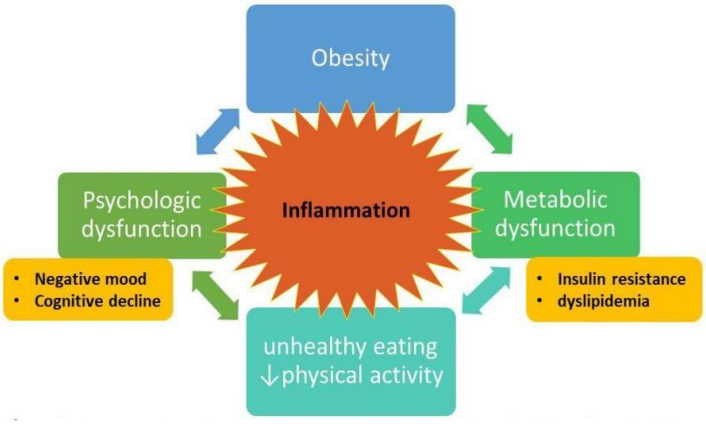
Preclinical studies have also provided mechanistic insights into how metformin may protect against OA progression. Animal models of OA treated with metformin showed reduced cartilage degradation, decreased synovial inflammation, and improved chondrocyte viability. These experimental findings align with clinical observations, reinforcing the hypothesis that metformin could be a viable pharmacological intervention for obese OA patients. Despite these promising results, large-scale, long-term clinical trials are necessary to establish metformin as a standard treatment for OA. Current evidence suggests that metformin has the potential to improve pain, function, and disease progression, but further studies are needed to determine optimal dosing strategies and patient selection criteria.

BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS OF METFORMIN IN OA MANAGEMENT

Metformin offers several potential benefits in the management of knee osteoarthritis (OA), particularly in obese patients, by addressing both metabolic and inflammatory aspects of the disease. One of its most significant advantages is its ability to modulate chronic low-grade inflammation, which plays a crucial role in OA progression. By reducing levels of pro- inflammatory cytokines such as interleukin-6 (IL-6) and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α), metformin helps to alleviate synovial inflammation, potentially reducing pain and stiffness in affected joints. Additionally, its activation of AMP-activated protein kinase (AMPK) contributes to cartilage protection by inhibiting matrix metalloproteinases (MMPs), which are responsible for the breakdown of cartilage extracellular matrix components.

This suggests that metformin may have disease-modifying properties rather than just providing symptomatic relief, distinguishing it from conventional nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) and corticosteroids.

Another major benefit of metformin is its role in weight regulation, which is particularly relevant in obese OA patients. Excess body weight places additional mechanical stress on knee joints, accelerating cartilage degeneration and exacerbating symptoms. Metformin improves insulin sensitivity, promotes fat metabolism, and reduces overall body weight, which in turn alleviates joint loading and enhances mobility. This indirect effect on OA progression adds to its therapeutic potential. Furthermore, metformin has a well-established safety profile, being widely used in diabetes management for decades with minimal severe side effects, making it a viable option for long-term use in OA patients.



Despite these promising benefits, metformin has certain limitations in OA management. Its efficacy varies among individuals, and not all OA patients may experience significant improvements in symptoms or disease progression. Some studies have indicated that metformin's benefits are more pronounced in patients with metabolic syndrome or insulin resistance, limiting its broader application to all OA cases. Additionally, while metformin's anti-inflammatory and chondroprotective effects are supported by preclinical and observational studies, large-scale randomized controlled trials are still needed to establish definitive evidence of its role in OA treatment. Another potential limitation is that metformin alone may not be sufficient for managing OA and may require combination therapy with lifestyle interventions, physiotherapy, or other pharmacological agents. Furthermore, mild gastrointestinal side effects, such as nausea and diarrhea, may occur in some individuals, though these are generally well- tolerated. Overall, while metformin presents a promising adjunct therapy for knee OA in obese patients, further research is necessary to fully understand its therapeutic potential and optimize its use in clinical practice.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

As the global burden of knee osteoarthritis (OA) continues to rise, particularly among obese individuals, there is an increasing need for novel therapeutic approaches that go beyond symptomatic relief and target the underlying mechanisms of disease progression. Metformin has emerged as a promising candidate due to its anti-inflammatory, chondroprotective, and weight-modulating properties. However, despite encouraging preliminary findings, further research is essential to establish its efficacy and safety as a treatment for OA. Future studies should focus on conducting large-scale, randomized controlled trials to determine the optimal dosage, treatment duration, and patient selection criteria for metformin in OA management. Additionally, investigations should explore whether metformin is most effective as a standalone therapy or in combination with existing OA treatments, such as physical therapy, exercise, and other pharmacological agents like disease-modifying osteoarthritis drugs (DMOADs).

Another important area for future research is understanding the molecular pathways through which metformin exerts its beneficial effects on joint health. While AMPK activation and inflammatory cytokine inhibition have been identified as key mechanisms, further studies are needed to elucidate how metformin influences cartilage regeneration and subchondral bone remodeling. Advances in biomarker analysis and imaging techniques, such as MRI-based cartilage assessment, could provide valuable insights into the structural benefits of metformin in OA patients. Additionally, personalized medicine approaches should be explored to identify which subgroups of OA patients—such as those with metabolic syndrome, insulin resistance, or high inflammatory markers—are most likely to benefit from metformin therapy.

In conclusion, metformin presents an exciting opportunity for transforming the management of knee OA, particularly in obese patients. Its ability to address both metabolic and inflammatory contributors to OA progression makes it a unique and potentially disease-modifying intervention. While current evidence supports its beneficial effects, further research is required to confirm its clinical utility and integration into OA treatment guidelines. If ongoing studies validate its efficacy, metformin could represent a cost-effective and widely accessible addition to the current therapeutic landscape for OA, ultimately improving the quality of life for millions of affected individuals.

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