Contributory Factors to Unsteadiness During Walking Up and Down Stairs in Patients With Diabetic Peripheral Neuropathy

DOI: 10.2337/dc14-0955

OBJECTIVE
Although patients with diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN) are more likely to fall than age-matched controls, the underlying causative factors are not yet fully understood. This study examines the effects of diabetes and neuropathy on strength generation and muscle activation patterns during walking up and down stairs, with implications for fall risk.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS
Sixty-three participants (21 patients with DPN, 21 diabetic controls, and 21 healthy controls) were examined while walking up and down a custom-built staircase. The speed of strength generation at the ankle and knee and muscle activation patterns of the ankle and knee extensor muscles were analyzed.

RESULTS
Patients with neuropathy displayed significantly slower ankle and knee strength generation than healthy controls during stair ascent and descent (P < 0.05). During ascent, the ankle and knee extensor muscles were activated significantly later by patients with neuropathy and took longer to reach peak activation (P < 0.05). During descent, neuropathic patients activated the ankle extensors significantly earlier, and the ankle and knee extensors took significantly longer to reach peak activation (P < 0.05).

CONCLUSIONS
Patients with DPN are slower at generating strength at the ankle and knee than control participants during walking up and down stairs. These changes, which are likely caused by altered activations of the extensor muscles, increase the likelihood of instability and may be important contributory factors for the increased risk of falling. Resistance exercise training may be a potential clinical intervention for improving these aspects and thereby potentially reducing fall risk.

Diabetic peripheral neuropathy (DPN) is a chronic complication of diabetes, affecting up to 50% of older patients (1,2). It is characterized by sensory loss in the lower limbs, altered sense of joint position, and impaired muscular function, which can result in alterations to gait (1–5). Patients with neuropathy are five times more likely to fall than age-matched controls, with over half of patients reporting at least one fall per year (6,7). Falls while walking down stairs account for 60% of all fall-related deaths, making this activity 10 times more hazardous than level-ground walking (8).
Thus the common daily task of negotiating stairs poses a high fall risk for people with diabetes and particularly those with peripheral neuropathy.

During walking up and down stairs (ascending and descending), the major muscles surrounding the ankle and knee joints generate strength at the joint, controlling the movement of the body. The speed at which joint strength is produced is an important factor related to unsteadiness, with a slower generation of joint strength indicative of a higher risk of falling (9–11). When walking on stairs, and particularly when walking down stairs, it is very difficult to recover balance following a moment of unsteadiness. Therefore it is of importance to reduce any marked unsteadiness to prevent a fall occurring on stairs. Patients with diabetic neuropathy display slower joint strength generation when balance is challenged while standing on one leg (12,13). This may have implications during the single leg stance phases of walking up and down stairs and could therefore explain the increased chance of falling in this population. While neuromuscular factors related to the individual are expected to be primarily responsible for unsteadiness, environmental factors such as low light conditions, the carrying of objects, and the lack of handrail use are also expected to increase the risk of falling.

Joint strength and the speed at which it is generated are the result of muscular forces surrounding the joint. During stair walking, the ankle and knee extensors are the primary muscles controlling the motion of the body (14–16). The timing of when these muscles are switched on (activated) is therefore key to the safe performance of these movements. Previous studies examining muscle activation patterns in patients with DPN have been inconclusive because of different measurement techniques, with earlier activations and later peak activations of the ankle extensors observed during level-ground walking (17,18). During stair climbing, the peak activations of the ankle and knee extensors have been observed to be earlier, yet the time when muscles switch on (muscle activation onset) has not yet been measured (19). A better understanding of how diabetic neuropathy affects lower-limb muscle activations and the resulting gait alterations can be gained via understanding when specific muscles switch on, when they reach full activation, and how long they are switched on.

The aim of this study was to examine the effects of diabetes and peripheral neuropathy on the speed of joint strength generation and muscle activation patterns during walking up and down stairs (ascent and descent). Here we address the hypothesis that the lower-limb muscles of diabetic patients will respond more slowly and be slower to develop the required strength when initially contacting the floor or step during stair walking. We hypothesize that this impaired muscular response will be an important factor contributing to unsteadiness and that this will be particularly evident on stairs where the physical demands are extremely high compared with level-ground walking.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Participants
Sixty-three participants (21 patients with DPN, 21 patients with diabetes but no peripheral neuropathy [D], and 21 healthy control participants [C]) matched for age (mean ± SD, 57.6 ± 9.4, 57.5 ± 12.7, and 57.6 ± 12.5 years, respectively; BMI, 30.1 ± 5.1, 28.1 ± 3.0, and 26.1 ± 3.9 kg/m²) gave their written informed consent to participate in this study, which was given ethical approval from the relevant bodies. Patients were excluded if they had open ulcers, required the use of a walking aid, had a history of other disorders affecting gait, or had a visual acuity of <6/18 (of any etiology).

Neuropathy Assessment
The presence and severity of neuropathy was measured using separate tests: the modified neuropathy disability score (mNDS) (1,2) and the vibration perception threshold (VPT) (1,2) using a neurothesiometer (Bailey Instruments Ltd., Manchester, U.K.). Patients were deemed to have moderate to severe neuropathy and grouped as DPN if in either one or both of their feet they displayed either an mNDS of ≥5 or a VPT of ≥25 (or both). Patients were deemed to have no neuropathy and were grouped as D, if in both feet they displayed an mNDS of ≤5 and a VPT of ≤24 (1,2).

Design
Participants attended two testing sessions where they were examined using a 10-camera motion capture system, to capture whole body movements (Vicon, Oxford, U.K.), connected to embedded force platforms measuring ground reaction forces (Kistler, Winterthur, Switzerland). Motion and force data were recorded simultaneously at 120 and 1,000 Hz, respectively. In one session, they were examined while ascending and descending a staircase, and they were examined during level-ground walking as a reference condition in another session. In both sessions, they were prepared using the same methods. In the stair negotiation session, muscle activity was assessed from representative lower-limb muscles, using wireless electromyographic surface electrodes (Delsys, Boston, MA) recording at 1,000 Hz. The analog signals from the electrodes were synchronized with the Vicon motion capture system and force platforms.

Procedure
Preparation
Fifty-seven retroreflective markers were attached to the participant’s body according to standard preparation methods, creating a 15-segment whole-body model. All participants wore specialist diabetic shoes (MedSurg; DARCO, Raisting, Germany), with a neutral footbed to standardize footwear between groups and to ensure that the diabetic patients walked with appropriate footwear. A brief period of acclimatization to the footwear around the laboratory was provided before testing began.

The electromyographic electrodes to measure muscle activations were placed on the skin over the muscles representative of the major knee and ankle extensors: the vastus lateralis (VL; knee extensors) and medial gastrocnemius (GN; ankle extensors) of both legs.

Stair Negotiation
Participants ascended and descended an eight-step staircase, with a step width of 1,050 mm, depth of 275 mm, and a step riser height of 175 mm. The staircase was instrumented with four force plates (500 × 275 mm; Kistler, Winterthur, Switzerland) embedded into the middle four steps. Participants were asked to walk without the use of the handrails but were told to use them...
in Vicon Nexus software. The three most complete trials (in terms of marker presence during the trial) for each person in each paradigm were then exported into Visual3D (C-Motion Inc., Germantown, MD) for analysis. Joint torques were normalized to body mass to enable valid group comparisons.

The RJTD of the support leg was calculated using the gradient of the joint torque time curve for the ankle and knee. In each stair trial, the joint torque values from each of the four embedded steps were used and the mean taken. However, in some trials, not all values were available, so as many were used as possible.

Muscle Activation
The same trials used for RJTD analysis were used for the muscle activation analysis. The muscle activation (electromyographic) signals were examined from the leg of the foot contacting the upper middle step of the eight-step staircase. Two stages of analysis were performed: the first stage identified when the activation of the muscle began and ended (defined as onset and cessation, respectively), and the second stage identified the peak of the muscle activity profile. In the first stage, the raw muscle activation signals were processed using a bespoke MATLAB (version 2008b, MathWorks, Natick, MA) program, as detailed previously by Buckley et al. (20), which identified when muscles are switched on and off (onset and cessation, respectively). The second stage identified muscle activation peaks of each muscle in Visual3D. The signal was processed using a full-wave rectification, a linear envelope with three window frames, and a Butterworth low-pass filter with a cutoff frequency of 4 Hz. The peak of the signal for each of the VL and GN muscles was then recorded with respect to foot-step contact. To enable accurate comparisons between groups, the commonly dominant peak was measured. The time at which the peak occurred in reference to foot-step contact was defined as the time of peak (TOP) and was measured, as well as the time difference between the onset of muscle activity and the peak of activity defined as the time to peak (TTP). Muscle activation timings were presented as bars of activations (Fig. 1).

Statistics
All statistical tests were performed on SPSS statistical package (version 18, Chicago, IL) with significance set at $P < 0.05$. Mean group differences in speed of strength generation (RJTD), muscle activation onset, TOP, TTP, and muscle activation duration were all statistically tested using a one-way ANOVA with a Bonferroni post hoc test, and all significances are reported with respect to the control group. Between gait tasks (stair ascent, stair descent, and level walking), differences (mean across all groups) were also tested using a repeated measures ANOVA with Bonferroni post hoc test, with all significances for this comparison reported with respect to level-ground walking. Only participants who completed all three gait tasks were used for this between-paradigm comparison (C, 10; D, 12; DPN, 12).

RESULTS
mNDS and VPT Scores
Patients with neuropathy displayed significantly higher mNDS (C, 1.4 ± 1.3; D, 1.9 ± 1.7; DPN, 7.6 ± 3.0; $P < 0.05$) and VPT (C, 9.4 ± 5.8; D, 9.2 ± 4.7; DPN, 31.5 ± 9.8; $P < 0.05$) than the C and D groups. There were no differences ($P > 0.05$) in the mNDS or VPT between C and D groups, underlining that this diabetes group had no neuropathy.

Gait Velocity
The patients with diabetes (D and DPN groups) performed stair ascent (C, 0.48 ± 0.07; D, 0.43 ± 0.07; DPN, 0.38 ± 0.08 ms$^{-1}$; $P < 0.05$), stair descent (C, 0.53 ± 0.09; D, 0.44 ± 0.09; DPN, 0.41 ± 0.11 ms$^{-1}$; $P < 0.05$), and level walking (C, 1.39 ± 0.19; D, 1.27 ± 0.18; DPN, 1.18 ± 0.27 ms$^{-1}$; $P < 0.05$) at significantly slower velocities than the control group.

Figure 1—Example diagram of a stair descent trial from a single participant to illustrate how the muscle activation parameters have been derived from the muscle activation signals (electromyographic [EMG] activity). The top panel displays the processed muscle activation signals from the knee extensor muscle (measured as VL). The corresponding activation bars (lower panel) illustrate how activation parameters are derived for the results: the start of the bars show the muscle onset, the change in color indicates the point at which the peak activation occurs, and the end of the bars denotes the muscle cessation with respect to when the foot contacted the force platform (FP ON) and left the force platform (FP OFF). The measurement of TOP and TTP is illustrated by the arrows above the knee extensor muscle bar. KE, knee extensor muscle.
Unsteadiness in Patients With Neuropathy

**Speed of Strength Generation**

During stair ascent, the D and DPN groups displayed significantly slower ankle and knee strength generation than the C group (Fig. 2). During stair descent, the D and DPN groups displayed significantly slower knee strength generation than the C group; the DPN group also displayed significantly slower ankle strength generation than the C group.

Speed of strength generation was significantly higher at both the ankle (level, 3.8 ± 1.3; ascent, 5.1 ± 3.07; descent, 8.7 ± 2.9 Nm·kg⁻¹·s⁻¹; \( P < 0.05 \)) and knee (level, 8.2 ± 2.6; ascent, 10.8 ± 4.0; descent, 10.66 ± 4.5 Nm·kg⁻¹·s⁻¹; \( P < 0.05 \)) during stair ascent and stair descent, compared with level walking, for all groups.

**Muscle Activations During Stair Ascent**

During stair ascent, the DPN group activated both the knee (VL muscle) and ankle (GN muscle) extensor muscles significantly later than the C group (Fig. 3). The activation peak occurred later for DPN patients in the knee extensors (TOP: C, 0.13 ± 0.05; D, 0.13 ± 0.05; DPN, 0.19 ± 0.10 s; \( P < 0.05 \)) and ankle extensors (C, 0.61 ± 0.13; D, 0.66 ± 0.13; DPN, 0.86 ± 0.27 s; \( P < 0.05 \)), resulting in a longer TTP for the knee extensors by the DPN group, but no differences were observed for the ankle extensors. The patients with neuropathy activated the knee extensors for significantly longer than the C group, while no differences were observed between the groups for the activation duration of the ankle extensors.

**Muscle Activations During Stair Descent**

During stair descent, the DPN group activated the ankle extensors earlier than the C group, while the knee extensors were activated at a similar time in all groups (Fig. 4). Once activated, the knee and ankle extensors took significantly longer to reach their TTP in both the D and DPN groups compared with the C group. The peak activation of the knee extensors by the DPN group occurred significantly later after foot-step contact (TOP: C, 0.49 ± 0.13; D, 0.62 ± 0.12; DPN, 0.67 ± 0.26 s; \( P < 0.05 \)), while the ankle extensors reached full activation at similar times between groups (TOP: C, 0.06 ± 0.05; D, 0.07 ± 0.05; DPN, 0.05 ± 0.06 s; \( P < 0.05 \)). The D and DPN groups also activated on the knee and ankle extensors for significantly longer in total.

**CONCLUSIONS**

People with diabetes—and, to a greater extent, patients with neuropathy—displayed significantly slower strength generation at both the ankle and knee joints and altered muscle activation timings during stair ascent and stair descent. The slower strength generation observed in people with diabetes, and particularly in patients with neuropathy, is likely to be a major factor explaining why this population is at a higher risk of falling than age-matched controls (6,7). The slower strength generation in diabetic patients, both with and without neuropathy, likely results from alterations in muscle activation patterns as discussed below in detail.

Patients with neuropathy generate ankle and knee strength at a significantly slower rate than a control population during the everyday tasks of stair ascent and stair descent (Fig. 2). Those with diabetes but without neuropathy also displayed slower ankle and knee strength generation during these tasks, but not to the same extent as the patients with moderate-severe neuropathy. The reduced speed of strength generation at both the ankle and knee joints is expected to result from a combination of reduced sensory and motor function as a result of polyneuropathy. Due to the reduction, or complete absence, of sensory and proprioceptive information transmitted to the central nervous system from the lower limbs, adequate motor responses cannot be properly coordinated to control movement. Essentially, as patients with sensory neuropathy cannot feel when they contact the ground/step, they may be inaccurate in the initiation of appropriate muscular responses. Furthermore, neuropathy patients commonly exhibit a variety of motor deficits in the muscle, including reduced motor nerve conduction velocity, denervation of motor units (predominantly in type II muscle fibers), reduced muscle volume, and impaired contractile properties as a result of non-enzymatic glycation (21–24). The combination of these factors is expected to impact on muscle response and subsequently slow the speed at which strength can be generated at the affected joints. Nonneuropathic diabetic patients also display some of the aforementioned factors before sensory characteristics are altered by marked neuropathy (25), which may therefore explain the reduced speed at which diabetic patients without neuropathy (D group) generate joint strength, albeit to a lesser extent than observed in patients with neuropathy (Fig. 2). A slower speed of strength generation has been shown to be a limiting factor to balance recovery during challenges to balance while standing on one leg, a movement similar to the weight acceptance phase of stair negotiation tasks (12,13,26). Therefore the decreased speed of strength generation observed in patients with neuropathy is expected to reduce their capability to adapt to a
perturbation in balance and may therefore limit the speed at which the stair-walking tasks can be performed safely by patients with diabetes.

The timing of when major muscles are first activated and when they reach their peak activation (the parameters of TTP and TOP; see Fig. 1 for definition of these variables) are expected to directly influence the resultant speed at which joint strength can be generated. During stair ascent, the delayed activation (switching on) of the knee extensors (represented by the VL muscle) and plantarflexors (represented by the GN muscle) by the patients with neuropathy may be related to insufficient sensory feedback, hindering the patient’s ability to detect when foot-step contact occurs (Fig. 3). Once activated, these muscles take significantly longer to reach their peak activation. In the knee extensors, this may indicate why strength generation was slower at the knee during this movement in patients with neuropathy (Fig. 2). The same may also be applicable to the plantarflexors; however, during stair ascent, the later peak measured from this muscle is more attributable to the propulsive ankle extension rather than the absorptive control of ankle flexion observed during weight acceptance.

During stair descent, changes are primarily observed in the plantarflexors with a significantly earlier activation, a longer TTP activation, and longer duration of activation (Fig. 4). The earlier activation of the plantarflexors in patients with DPN is expected to be an anticipatory mechanism, preparing the ankle joint to stabilize before contact with the step actually occurs. Upon foot-step contact, the plantarflexors are slower to reach peak activation in patients with DPN than the controls. This is expected to be an influential factor leading to the reduced speed at which ankle strength is generated by people with neuropathy. The patients with neuropathy also displayed a longer TTP activation in the knee extensors, but similarly to during stair ascent, the peak observed in the secondarily activated muscle is related to the propulsive knee extension rather than the strength generated during the weight acceptance phase to control knee flexion. These altered muscle activations are expected to exert a major influence upon the speed at which strength can be generated, particularly the activation onset (switching the muscle on) and the TTP muscle activation. The consequential decreases in speed of strength generation would likely lead to an increase in potentially hazardous perturbations to balance during stair negotiation tasks, which may then ultimately result in falls.

The muscle activation timings observed in patients with diabetes but without neuropathy, during both stair ascent and descent, follow a similar trend to the results observed in patients with neuropathy, albeit to a lesser extent. It is likely that these changes are the result of physiological alterations to skeletal muscle before measurable sensory neuropathy is observed. Nonenzymatic glycation as a result of diabetes may affect the contractile machinery of skeletal muscle independently of neuropathy as shown previously on isolated animal muscle (27). This may at least partly explain why changes have been observed proximally at the knee extensors as well as distally at the ankle extensors in diabetic patients without neuropathy.

Our muscle activation findings contrast with previous findings that the TOP occurs significantly later at both the ankle and knee during both stair ascent and descent (19). These differences may be because our data are presented in absolute time, whereas the previous study presented their results as a
percentage of stance phase. Although people with diabetes walk more slowly and therefore have a longer stance phase, the activation of muscles and the appropriate speed of strength generation need to occur within a given absolute time period upon weight acceptance to ensure avoidance of a perturbation to balance. Therefore, we believe presentation of these parameters in absolute time is the most relevant for interpretation of fall risk in this population. These activations and their timings can therefore only be validly measured in absolute time, especially the onset of the activation and the TTP, which have been highlighted as key variables influencing the speed of strength generation (RJTD). The slower gait velocity in both patient groups with diabetes could potentially impact upon the speed of strength generation. However, an ANCOVA revealed that the significant differences we identified between the groups remained after accounting for gait velocity as the covariate, highlighting that diabetes and diabetic neuropathy are the determining factors for this parameter. People with diabetes have been reported to be less physically active compared with their nondiabetic counterparts (28), and this difference in activity levels is also likely reflected in the population sampled in our study. Although it may not be possible to separate cause and effect in relation to physical activity and diabetes, lower activity levels might contribute to differences in muscular capabilities, which could subsequently affect the rate of joint strength generation.

During both stair negotiation tasks, there is a distinct pattern of a primary muscle group controlling balance during weight acceptance, followed by a secondary muscle group controlling balance during propulsion. During stair descent, the plantarflexors of the support leg control the acceleration of the body’s center of mass during weight acceptance, while the knee extensors, activated later, are used primarily to control the propulsive movement during terminal stance. Conversely, during stair ascent, the knee extensors of the support leg are activated during weight acceptance to steady the body upon foot-step contact, while the plantarflexors are activated much later to control balance during the propulsion phase. In both stair ascent and stair descent, the ankle and knee were required to generate joint strength at a faster speed than during level-ground walking (Fig. 2), further highlighting the increased physical demands required to perform stair negotiation safely. This corroborates with previous observations of higher absolute joint strength (measured as joint torque) being required during stair negotiation tasks than during level-ground walking in nondiabetic populations (16, 20, 29). This may further explain why stair ascent and, particularly stair descent, are such hazardous everyday activities and therefore pose the highest risk for falls in patients with diabetes and peripheral neuropathy.

Previous studies have shown that targeted resistance training can improve muscle power, strength, and speed of strength generation in high-risk populations such as the elderly (30–32). Such training has been shown to reduce the difficulty of performing everyday tasks, decrease the risk of falling, and consequently cut subsequent hospital admissions (31, 33). Therefore, it is suggested that such training may favorably alter muscle activations and increase the speed of ankle and knee strength development in people with DPN and be one potential clinical solution for reducing the risk of falling during the everyday task of stair walking.

Acknowledgments. The authors appreciate the help and support from staff at the Manchester Diabetes Centre in the U.K.

Funding. This research was supported by clinical research grant funding from the European Foundation for the Study of Diabetes and from the Diabetes Research & Wellness Foundation in the U.K.

Duality of Interest. No potential conflicts of interest relevant to this article were reported.

Author Contributions. J.C.H. researched and analyzed data and wrote the manuscript. S.J.B. researched data. F.L.B. and A.J.M.B. reviewed and edited the manuscript. G.C. contributed to the analysis methods. C.N.M. contributed to the results and discussion and reviewed and edited the manuscript. N.D.R. conceived the study, designed the projects, analyzed data, and wrote the manuscript. N.D.R. is the guarantor of this work and, as such, had access to all the data in the study and takes full responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.


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