Neurophysiologie Clinique/Clinical Neurophysiology (2019) 49, 335—342

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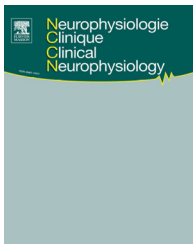

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Reliability of maximum isometric hip and knee torque measurements in children with cerebral palsy using a paediatric exoskeleton — Lokomat

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Received 16 July 2018; accepted 3 December 2018
Available online 23 December 2018

KEYWORDS
Psychometric properties;
Lower limb;
Muscle strength;
Standing position

Summary
Background. — The Lokomat (by L-Force tool) allows the measurement of the maximum voluntary isometric torque (MVIT) at the knee and hip joints in a standing position, as close as possible to the posture adopted during walking. However, the reliability of this measurement in children with cerebral palsy (CP) remains unknown. The main goal of this study was to evaluate inter and intra-tester reliability of a novel tool (L-Force) in CP population.
Procedure. — L-Force reliability was determined in 17 children with CP by two experienced therapists. We collected MVITs in hip and knee flexors and extensors. Relative and absolute reliability of maximum joint torques were estimated using the intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC) and standard error of measurement (SEM), respectively. The correlation between L-Force and hand-held dynamometer (HHD) was also reported.
Findings. — ICCs were good to excellent for intra and inter-tester reliability (all $P \leq 0.001$). The SEM ranged from 2.0 to 4.1 Nm (12.1 to 21.7%) within-tester and from 2.1 to 3.5 Nm (11.9 to 22.5%) between testers. The correlation was fair to good between L-Force and HHD measures ($r = [0.50—0.75]$; all $P < 0.01$) with higher values for flexors than extensors.

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neucli.2018.12.001

Conclusion. — The L-Force is a reliable tool for quantifying the hip and knee flexors and extensors torques in children with cerebral palsy with an important timesaving and in a more functional posture than traditional HHD.

Introduction

In their daily practice, physiotherapists evaluate muscle strength to identify the deficits for planning interventions and then to measure intervention effect or effectiveness [8]. In children and adolescents with cerebral palsy (CP), the evaluation of muscle strength represents a challenge, given the complex musculoskeletal condition and the poor selective motor control [14,16,47]. The outcomes of many interventions in CP, including physical training, medications and surgery affect, or are conditioned by, muscle strength. For example, in gait rehabilitation, the lower-limb muscle isometric strength is commonly assessed [31,46] as it is directly related to several functional tasks, including walking [30,33]. Unfortunately, the commonly used evaluation tools present some limitations. The Medical Research Council scale [26], based on nonlinear categories, is partially subjective ranging from 0 (no contraction) to 5 (normal strength) and not sensitive to small or moderate changes in muscle strength [19,32]. It also presents low inter-tester reliability [7,24]. The hand-held dynamometer (HHD) is an objective measurement. A maximum voluntary isometric contraction measured with HHD is a rather simple, and easy accessible way to assess muscle weakness. However, previous studies pointed out a lack of inter-tester reliability and recommended not to rely only on HHD measurements for evaluation of treatment effects in patients with neurological disorders [43,45,55]. The variability comes from the difficulty to ensure an isometric contraction [54,56] and to find a standardized position [28]. Both manual testing and HHD require time and effort from the therapist and patient. Moreover, the lying or sitting postures used during these tests do not correspond to the walking posture [27]. Alternative methods may be valuable to guarantee better reliability of measurements in patients with motor disorders, save the therapist's effort, and use a standardized position closer to that of walking.

In the past two decades, conventional rehabilitation approaches have been complemented with robotic-assisted devices and especially for gait rehabilitation. The Lokomat (Hocoma, Switzerland), the most used walking robotic aid in rehabilitation [23], provides weight support and assists the patient's hip and knee efforts using four servomotors (i.e., engine with torque and position sensors). These servomotors can measure torques at the hip and knee joints during maximal voluntary isometric torque (MVIT) in the so-called ''L-Force'' test (see reference [40] for more technical details). When performed during a Lokomat training session, it requires only 5 minutes and allows a more common follow-up of muscle strength at an averaged joint angle of gait [25,36]. Compared to the HHD, L-Force allows for better standardization of measurement and for better stabilization during measurements by avoiding compensatory movements [8]. Moreover, L-Force tool provides real-time feedback, which is particularly valuable for motor control and motivational purposes in children with CP who often exhibit proprioceptive and attention disorders [4,34]. Despite the current use of Lokomat in gait rehabilitation [23], the L-Force tool is rarely used by clinicians due to the lack of metrological information, especially its reliability in paediatric populations. In adults with neurological disorders, Bolliger et al. [9] highlighted a sufficient inter and intra-tester reliability (ICC = 0.5—0.97) of the L-Force tool for clinical use. However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has evaluated the reliability in children with CP. The purpose of the present study was to assess the reliability of the L-Force tool implemented in the paediatric orthotics of the Lokomat and the correlation with HHD measures in children with cerebral palsy. A better understanding of the reliability of this assessment method would allow a better use of the L-Force to investigate and follow up the strength gain during gait rehabilitation process in children with CP.

Material and methods

Participants

The sample size estimation was based on a significance level of 0.05, a power of 0.80, and an ICC-value between 0.60 (fair) and 0.90 (excellent) for both intra and inter-tester reliability analysis. Then, considering Bolliger et al. [9] study, the minimal sample size was 15 for this reliability analysis. In anticipation of possible data loss or participant attrition, 17 children with CP were included in this study. The inclusion criteria were:

- a diagnosis of spastic bilateral CP with a gross motor function classification system (GMFCS) level I, II or III [37];
- ability to communicate fear, discomfort or pain;
- understanding simple instructions;
- a femur length of 23—35 cm (to fit in Lokomat pediatric orthosis);
- having the degree of passive joint range of motion in the hips and knees that allowed them to assume the test position (30° hip flexion, 45° knee flexion).

Children were excluded if they had a surgery within the last 12 months. Following the recruitment, the sample was composed of 9 boys and 8 girls (mean ± standard deviation, age: 10.0 ± 3.2 years; height: 132 ± 10 cm and mass: 30.6 ± 9.7 kg). Ten of them were classified as GMFCS level II and 7 as level III. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of UHC Sainte-Justine. Written parental informed consent and child assent were also obtained.

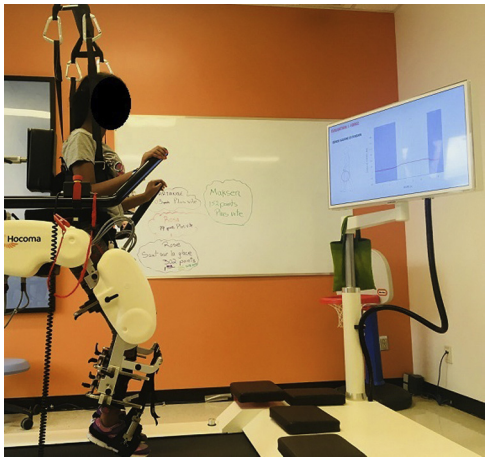

Figure 1 Subject installed in the position used for the MVIT measurement with the L-Force tool. The Lokomat is set to position control mode with preset fixed joint angles (hip 30° flexion, knee 45° flexion).

Testing

MVIT was assessed in four muscle groups (i.e., hip flexors and extensors and knee flexors and extensors) bilaterally using L-Force tool. L-Force test was performed in a two-stage protocol using the pediatric version of Lokomat Pro (Hocoma AG, Volketswil, Switzerland). HHD measurements were also taken for the same muscle groups in the same day as the inter-tester evaluation.

Stage 1 — Inter-tester reliability of L-Force and its correlation with the HHD

L-Force tests were performed by two experienced therapists (GG and YC). The order of the two testers was randomized and each tester was blinded to the results obtained by the other. Each participant was installed by the first tester into the Lokomat with the pre-set fixed joints angles (30° hip flexion, 45° knee flexion, Fig. 1). Each participant accomplished a familiarization trial of L-Force test with submaximal effort followed by two maximal effort tests. During each test, the instruction ''3-2-1-go'' was displayed on a computer screen and was verbally given by each tester as well. Each participant was instructed to produce force as fast and as hard as possible, and was required to hold maximum strength for 5 seconds. The joint torque was measured by the Lokomat and displayed on the screen for the child and the tester. Maximum flexion and extension torques were reported for hips and knees. A 2-min rest period was allowed between trials. Then, the participant was taken out of the Lokomat and had a 5-min rest period for fatigue recovery. Thereafter, the second tester re-installed the participant into the Lokomat using the same setting of body weight support and the same pre-set fixed joint angle. She repeated the protocol in the same manner as the first tester.

One to two hours after the L-Force testing, an experienced assessor (YC) measured the maximal voluntary isometric torques using an HHD, to assess the correlation between the two measures of strength (L-Force test vs. HHD). The HHD test positions were similar to those used by Eek et al. [21]. The participants were instructed to push as hard and as fast as possible over a 5-s period until hearing the auditory signal generated by the HHD.

Stage 2 — Intra-tester reliability of L-Force

The second stage was carried out a week later by tester GG only to assess the intra-tester reliability. Each participant was installed into the Lokomat using the same anthropometric settings as in stage 1. Then participant performed two L-Force trials with a 2-min resting period in-between.

Statistical analysis

An analysis of variance (Anova)-based intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) was used to evaluate the reliability of L-Force measurements. All statistics were processed using the SPSS package (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). To test reliability, we calculated ICCs with 95% confidence intervals (two-way random-effects model) by using both single values (in each case the maximal measurement of testers G and Y) and average values (average of measurements for each joint in every direction). ICC scores were compared with the following scale for interpretation of correlation: excellent (1.00—0.8), good (0.80—0.60), and poor (< 0.60) [56]. Bland-Altman plots were also reported to describe the level of agreement between intra and inter-tester measurements [5]. Additionally, the absolute standard error of measurement (SEM) in unit of joint torque, the relative SEM in percentage of grand mean and the coefficient of variation (CV) were calculated. While the ICC reflects the degree of consistency of a measurement and is unit free, the SEM and the CV provides information about the expected trial-to-trial noise in the measured data. Correlations between L-Force and HHD measures were determined by using the Pearson score ($r < 0.20$, ''very weak''; 0.20—0.39, ''weak''; 0.40—0.59, ''moderate''; 0.60—0.79, ''strong'' and 0.80—1.00 ''very strong relationship'') [56]. The significance level was set to $P = 0.05$. As it is recognized that there are large inter-limb strength differences in children with CP, statistical analysis considered each side independently for all the tests ($n = 2 \times 17$), as done in previous studies [41,42,43,52,54].

Results

Part 1: reliability of L-Force measurements

The means and standard deviations of measured muscle strength for the three evaluations are reported in Table 1. For inter-tester reliability, ICCs ranged from 0.80 to 0.87 and SEM from 2.1 to 3.5 Nm (i.e., 12.1—21.7%). As for intra-tester reliability, ICCs ranged from 0.70 to 0.87 while the SEM varied from 2.0 to 4.1 Nm (i.e., 11.9—22.5%). The highest SEM value was observed in hip extension for both intra and inter-tester assessments (4.1 and 3.5 Nm, respectively). Reliability was good for all ICCs calculated from single as well as from averaged measures (see Table 2). Bland—Altman plots were reported as supplementary material (see Supplementary data, Figs. 1 and 2).

Table 1 Maximal voluntary isometric contraction (Nm) in 17 patients with cerebral palsy. Data are mean (standard deviation) of the maximal voluntary isometric contraction strength as measured by tester GG (twice) and by tester YC (once) using L-Force tool.

Joint	Tester GG (stage 1)	Tester GG (stage 2)	Tester YC (stage 1)
Hip flexion	19.05 (11.2)	20.8 (11.2)	18.8 (10.3)
Hip extension	16.6 (13.4)	19.9 (15.6)	17.6 (12.2)
Knee flexion	10.7 (8.0)	10.5 (8.8)	9.0 (7.0)
Knee extension	9.2 (8.3)	10.7 (8.2)	10.5 (8.5)

Part 2: Correlations between L-Force and HHD measurements

All correlations were positive and significant between L-Force and HHD measures (see Fig. 2). For the hip and knee flexors, the correlations were equal to 0.769 and 0.609 ($P \leq 0.001$) respectively, which indicates the presence of a strong relationship between the L-Force and the HHD. However, the correlations were moderate for hip and knee extensors ($r = 0.530$ and 0.528, $P \leq 0.001$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the reliability of Lokomat-based tool (L-Force) to measure maximal voluntary isometric torque in CP children (GMFCS levels II and III). Our main findings were that:

- inter and intra-reliability were good to excellent for both knee and hip in flexion and extension;
- the L-Force measures were more correlated with HHD in flexion than in extension.

In healthy adults, L-Force presents good to excellent intra-tester (ICC = 0.71—0.90) and inter-tester reliability (ICC = 0.72—0.95) [9], which are better than those found with HHD in the same population [45]. Fair to excellent reliability of L-Force were also found in adults with neuromuscular disorders (ICC = 0.50—0.96 for intra-tester and 0.66—0.97 for inter-tester) [9]. In the paediatric CP population, the present study reported good to excellent reliability (ICC = 0.80—0.87 in inter-tester and 0.70—0.87 in intra-tester). Again, inter-reliability coefficients were better than those obtained with the HHD in children with CP ($n = 25$) when compared to Verschuren et al. [55] results. They reported an ICC value ranging from 0.42 to 0.73 for the break-method (which requires that the examiner pushes against the child's limb until the subject's maximal muscular effort is overcome and the joint being tested gives way), and from 0.49 to 0.82 for the make-method (the child is instructed to push as hard as possible against the HHD that is maintained perpendicular to the child's limb segment) [55]. The tester's strength is a major determinant of the inter-tester reliability with HHD [57]. This source of variability disappears with the fixed support offered by the Lokomat. Moreover, all patients are tested in a standardized position in the Lokomat, as close as possible to the walking posture. It is harder to standardized positions when using the HHD with children with spastic CP because compensatory movements during the measurements cannot be excluded [3,55]. Because of the force-length relationship of mono- and bi-articular muscles [1], the different postures between L-Force and HHD would explain the measurement differences between these two tools. The L-Force tool could be in line with the contemporary task-oriented approach because it allows to evaluate MVITs at an averaged joint angle of gait. Such evaluation should help to refine the relationship between muscle strength and walking abilities. Future studies should evaluate if L-Force measures are more correlated with static tasks and walking abilities than HHD measures, done with hip and knee flexed at 90° [25,39]. We found better inter-tester coefficients than intra-tester coefficients which is in agreement with previous findings [9]. Both studies determined the inter-tester reliability the same day while measurements for estimating the intra-tester reliability were spaced a few days apart. This finding is consistent with the fact that children with CP showed a large day-to-day variability in the generation of muscle force [49,50]. As in adult with neuromuscular disorders, L-Force is a reliable tool to assess the muscle status in a group of children with CP, which seems to outperform the HHD.

SEM is the most clinically relevant metric since it facilitates the interpretation of whether changes (e.g., caused by an intervention) exceed measurement error or not [16]. A direct comparison with adult populations [9] is not possible since authors did not report relative SEM (%) and comparison of absolute SEM is irrelevant due to the large difference in muscle strength. However, our absolute SEM values were overall smaller than those reported with HHD in children with cerebral palsy [51,54]. These differences are certainly due to the reduced uncertainty obtained with the L-Force tool and might also be due to using test positions which are standardized. In agreement with Bolliger et al. [9], the lowest SEM was observed for the hip flexors (12% in both intra and inter-testers measures) and the highest SEM for the hip extensors (22% in intra-tester tests). This is consistent with the prominent weakness in lower limb extensors often observed in patients with CP [15]. Moreover, this variability could also be caused by intrinsic factors (as muscle tone variability, muscles co-contraction and fatigue). Although the co-contraction phenomenon has been mainly described as a protective mechanism at a joint [2], the amount of antagonist co-contraction could also significantly influence the resultant torque [10,38]. Finally, a source of variability can also come from the complexity of the task (i.e., the ability to isolate selected muscle activation), especially in children with CP who present a poor selective motor control [47].

Table 2 Inter and intra-tester reliability of L-Force measurements in hip and knee flexion and extension (All, $P \leq 0.001$).

Joint	Inter-tester					Intra-tester				
	Single measurement ICC (CI 95%)	Average measurement ICC (CI 95%)	SEM (Nm)	SEM (%)	CV (%)	Single measurement ICC (CI 95%)	Average measurement ICC (CI 95%)	SEM (Nm)	SEM (%)	CV (%)
Hip flexion	0.80 (0.63—0.89)	0.89 (0.77—0.94)	2.3	12.1	14	0.87 (0.76—0.94)	0.93 (0.86—0.97)	2.3	11.9	13
Hip extension	0.87 (0.75—0.93)	0.93 (0.86—0.96)	3.5	20.6	22	0.86 (0.70—0.93)	0.92 (0.83—0.96)	4.1	22.5	24
Knee flexion	0.80 (0.62—0.89)	0.89 (0.76—0.94)	2.1	21.6	26	0.79 (0.62—0.89)	0.88 (0.76—0.94)	2.1	20.0	24
Knee extension	0.85 (0.72—0.92)	0.92 (0.84—0.96)	2.1	21.7	25	0.70 (0.49—0.91)	0.83 (0.66—0.91)	2.0	19.6	25

ICC: intraclass correlation coefficient; SEM: standard error of measurement; CV: coefficient of variation; CI: confidence interval.

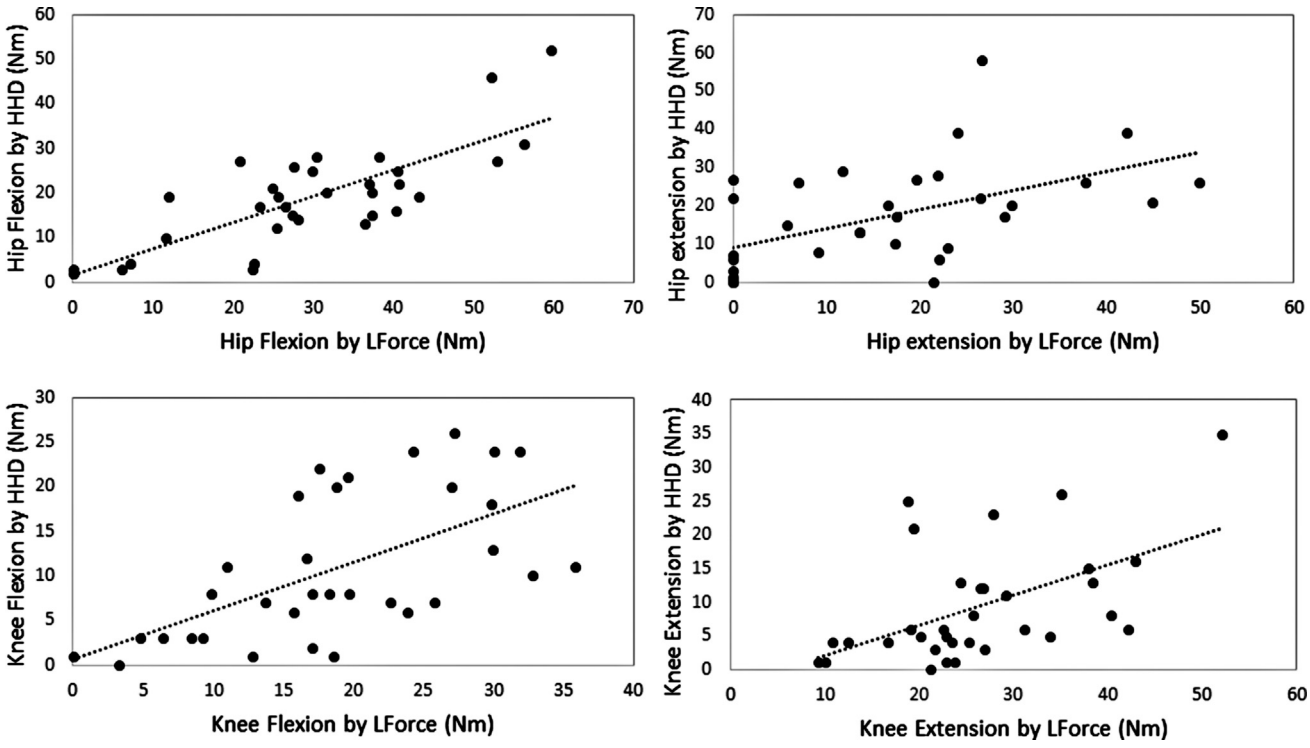

Figure 2 Scatter plots of MVITs measured by the HHD and L-Force.

There is a strong relationship between muscle strength and walking abilities [13,20]. To interpret the effectiveness of interventions, longitudinal changes should then be compared with SEM values. In adults with neurologic disorders, studies assessing the effects of training have shown improvements of 43—58% in maximal voluntary isometric torque [11,12]. Besides, in children with CP, some studies reported an increase of 30—80% in lower limb muscle strength following 4 to 12 weeks of training [6,14,18,22,35]. Compared to our SEM (%) values, the L-Force tool represents a reliable indicator in interventional studies to detect the real benefit of training in a population that resembles our study sample (i.e., GMFCS levels II—III). Furthermore, regular follow-ups with the L-Force tool should help to determine/adjust the duration of training that could be expected to improve strength. Training duration and frequency are ongoing topics in clinical research and are still to some extent controversial. In his systematic review, Scianni et al. [44] reported changes in muscle strength after 4 to 16 weeks of training in children with CP. The results of 16 weeks of training were similar and sometimes lower than those obtained with 4 to 8 weeks of training. This means that longer interventions are not necessarily more effective [6,14,17,29,53]. It is thus more appropriate to follow-up more frequently on muscle strength changes during training (e.g. every 1 or 2 weeks) so that these changes can be detected earlier and interventions made more effective. The L-Force assessment tool is a reliable approach to evaluate muscle strength in a group of children with cerebral palsy (i.e., GMFCS II and III) in a walking posture. Hence, this tool should allow walking-specific strength assessments and could be used to clarify the relationship between walking abilities and lower limb muscle strength.

A few limitations can be evoked in this study. First, the results are valid for CP children with GMFCS level II and III by considering the same inclusion/exclusion criteria of this study. These results cannot be generalized to children with lower functional levels or with other clinical sub-types of CP. Second, cognition impairment was not formally assessed, while it has been cited as a possible reason for large within participant variability when assessing muscle strength in children with CP [51]. Third, the intra and inter-tester performances can be influenced by the way the child is installed in the Lokomat as well as the motivation or co-operation of the patient that may differ according to the day and the tester. Indeed, fatigue and boredom can be observed in this kind of experimental protocol and undermine the reliability of measurements [48]. Fourth, measuring muscle strength in L-Force position may be uncomfortable. Fifth, the high costs of a Lokomat limit the use of the L-Force tool to rehabilitation centers that already own this device. Finally, to date, the clinical usage of L-Force is limited to children who receive gait training with the Lokomat.

Conclusion

The good to excellent inter and intra-tester reliability of the L-Force supports its use in the follow-ups in children with cerebral palsy with GMFCS levels II and III. To analyze changes in muscle strength, we recommend using our relative SEM values to determine if the change is within

uncertainties or not, and to consider each muscle group separately.

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the help of the Ordre professionnel de la physiothérapie du Québec (OPPQ) which funded this study. The first author is scholar of Quebec Research Fund — Nature and Technology (FRQ-NT). In addition, the children, their parents, and the (paediatric) physical therapists from the UHC Sainte-Justine (Marie Enfant Rehabilitation Center and affiliated schools) who gave their assistance are appreciated. The authors appreciate the invaluable assistance of Clara Ziane (Université de Montréal) for her expert review of the article in the English language.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found, in the online version, at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neucli.2018.12.001.

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