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Patellar Chondromalacia in Basketball Athletes: A Narrative Review of Epidemiology, Mechanisms, Assessment, and Management

Shiqi Tian[1]

Abstract

Patellar chondromalacia is a common patellofemoral disorder affecting young, highly active individuals, particularly basketball players who are frequently exposed to repetitive jumping, cutting, landing, and deep knee flexion. The substantial cumulative load on the patellofemoral joint increases this population's risk of symptomatic and asymptomatic cartilage degeneration, which may impair athletic performance and long-term joint health. This review aims to synthesize current evidence regarding the epidemiology, pathomechanics, clinical presentation, assessment, and management of patellar chondromalacia in basketball athletes. A narrative review approach was employed, analyzing recent and relevant scientific literature, including epidemiological studies, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) findings, and clinical guidelines on patellofemoral disorders in athletic populations. The findings indicate a high prevalence of patellofemoral cartilage abnormalities among basketball players, as detected through MRI, even in asymptomatic individuals. Key contributing factors include repetitive mechanical overload, joint malalignment, neuromuscular deficits, quadriceps dysfunction, and inadequate management of training load. Accurate diagnosis requires an integrated approach that combines symptom assessment, physical examination, functional testing, and the selective use of imaging modalities. Conservative management remains the first-line treatment, emphasizing patient education, load modification, and combined hip- and knee-focused exercise therapy, with adjunctive interventions such as taping, foot orthoses, or manual therapy applied selectively. Early identification and individualized rehabilitation strategies are essential to mitigate symptom persistence, prevent progression of cartilage degeneration, and support sustained athletic performance in basketball players.

Keywords: *Basketball athletes, Cartilage degeneration, Patellar chondromalacia, Patellofemoral pain, Rehabilitation*

A. Introduction

Patellar chondromalacia refers to softening, fibrillation, fissuring, and progressive degeneration of the articular cartilage on the patellar surface. It is often discussed together with patellofemoral pain (PFP), yet the two concepts are not identical. PFP is primarily a clinical symptom-based diagnosis characterized by retropatellar or peripatellar pain during activities that load the patellofemoral joint, whereas patellar chondromalacia emphasizes structural cartilage change. The distinction is important because structural abnormalities may exist without pain, and substantial pain may occur despite relatively mild imaging findings (Kamat et al., 2022).

Basketball is a sport that repeatedly exposes the knee to jumping, cutting, deceleration, rapid changes of direction, and landing under high compressive and shear loads. These movement demands increase patellofemoral joint reaction forces, especially during deep flexion and

[1]Southwest university, Chongqing, China. 970110713@qq.com

eccentric control tasks. Because of these repetitive mechanical stresses, basketball athletes are at elevated risk of patellofemoral symptoms, cartilage overload, and progressive joint degeneration over time (Trojan et al., 2019).

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) studies in collegiate and professional basketball players have reported a high prevalence of asymptomatic and symptomatic knee abnormalities, including patellofemoral cartilage lesions, bone marrow edema, fat pad changes, and tendon-related findings. These observations suggest that cartilage health in basketball athletes is dynamic and vulnerable to cumulative training and competition load. Therefore, a focused review on patellar chondromalacia in basketball athletes is clinically meaningful for sports medicine physicians, physiotherapists, athletic trainers, and rehabilitation specialists (Pappas et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2021; Nosrat et al., 2023). The purpose of this article is to review the current evidence regarding the epidemiology, pathomechanics, clinical characteristics, assessment strategies, and conservative as well as surgical management of patellar chondromalacia in basketball athletes. In addition, the review highlights practical considerations for prevention and decision-making regarding return to sport.

B. Methods

This study employed a narrative review design to provide a comprehensive and integrative synthesis of the existing literature on patellar chondromalacia in basketball athletes. This approach was selected to enable the inclusion and critical appraisal of diverse types of evidence, including epidemiological data, pathomechanical insights, clinical assessment strategies, and management approaches. Unlike a systematic review, this design does not aim to produce a standardized quantitative synthesis but rather to develop a holistic, clinically meaningful understanding of the topic through the conceptual integration of findings from multiple sources.

The research procedure began with a structured literature search conducted across major scientific databases, including PubMed, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar, covering publications up to March 2026. Core search terms included “patellar chondromalacia,” “patellofemoral pain,” “basketball players,” “cartilage degeneration,” “MRI,” “rehabilitation,” and “return to sport.” Article selection was performed in a stepwise manner by screening titles, abstracts, and full texts for relevance to the study objectives. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles published within the last 10 years, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, clinical practice guidelines, international consensus statements, cohort studies, and imaging-based investigations. Additionally, a limited number of earlier foundational studies were retained when they provided essential insights into MRI findings or sport-specific loading patterns in basketball athletes.

Data were collected through a document analysis of the selected scientific articles. Extracted information included study population characteristics, research design, key epidemiological, risk factor, and pathomechanistic findings, clinical and imaging assessment methods, and both conservative and surgical management strategies. Each study was critically examined to ensure relevance, methodological rigor, and alignment with the review's focus, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the synthesized evidence.

Data analysis was conducted using a narrative synthesis approach, in which findings from the included studies were organized and integrated into key thematic domains. The literature was categorized into four main areas: (1) epidemiology and sport-specific burden, (2) mechanisms and risk factors, (3) clinical and imaging assessment, and (4) management strategies. Through this process, patterns, consistencies, and discrepancies across studies were identified and interpreted to produce a coherent, evidence-informed overview. This analytical

approach emphasizes clinical applicability and conceptual clarity, although it does not provide pooled quantitative estimates as in meta-analytic methods.

C. Results and Discussion

Epidemiology and Sport-Specific Burden

Direct epidemiological studies that isolate "patellar chondromalacia" as a single diagnosis in basketball athletes remain limited; however, the broader literature on patellofemoral pain, cartilage abnormalities, and basketball-related knee overload strongly indicates that this population carries a meaningful burden of patellofemoral pathology. Patellofemoral problems are particularly common in adolescents, young adults, and athletes engaged in jumping and cutting sports, with basketball repeatedly identified as a high-risk activity profile (Trojan et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2018).

The burden is not restricted to symptomatic athletes. MRI studies in collegiate basketball players have shown that a large proportion of knees demonstrate structural abnormalities even before a season begins, and that the prevalence and severity of cartilage abnormalities may increase across a competitive season. Professional basketball cohorts have similarly shown notable rates of patellofemoral cartilage lesions. These data imply that repetitive demands in basketball can elicit measurable joint tissue responses even in the absence of overt symptoms (Pappas et al., 2016; Rubin et al., 2021).

From a sports medicine perspective, this dual burden of symptomatic and asymptomatic pathology has two implications. First, clinicians should be alert to early symptoms such as anterior knee pain, post-training swelling, and exercise intolerance. Second, imaging abnormalities in athletes must be interpreted cautiously, because structural findings alone do not establish the source or clinical significance of pain (Gao et al., 2021; Nosrat et al., 2023)..

Pathomechanics and Contributing Factors

Patellar chondromalacia in basketball athletes is best understood as a multifactorial overload condition. The patellofemoral joint is repeatedly exposed to high compressive forces during squatting, stair descent, landing, sprint deceleration, and cutting. Basketball intensifies this exposure through repeated jumps, high-velocity directional changes, contact situations, and dense training schedules. When tissue recovery capacity is exceeded, cartilage matrix homeostasis may be disrupted, eventually leading to softening, fissuring, and degeneration (Kamat et al., 2022). Mechanical alignment and patellar tracking are also central considerations. Patella alta, increased lateral patellar tilt, trochlear dysplasia, abnormal tibial tubercle–trochlear groove distance, and altered lower-limb rotational alignment may all redistribute joint contact stress. Under these circumstances, local stress concentration can occur at the patellar facets or trochlear surface, increasing the likelihood of cartilage deterioration over time (Masroori et al., 2024; Eijkenboom et al., 2020).

Neuromuscular and functional contributors are equally important. Deficits in quadriceps strength, poor eccentric control, delayed muscle activation, reduced hip abductor and external rotator performance, limited ankle dorsiflexion, and dynamic knee valgus can all alter load transmission through the lower extremity. In basketball athletes, faulty landing mechanics and inadequate energy absorption strategies may further increase patellofemoral joint stress. Therefore, pathogenesis is not simply a matter of cartilage wear but of repeated load exposure interacting with individual movement capacity and anatomical predisposition (Neal et al., 2019).

Training-load mismanagement deserves particular attention. Rapid increases in jump count, practice volume, or competition density may exceed the athlete's adaptive threshold. Similarly, insufficient recovery, persistent participation despite pain, and poor periodization may amplify cumulative tissue stress. For this reason, patellar chondromalacia should be viewed not only as a local knee disorder but also as a load-management problem within the broader performance environment (Neal et al., 2024).

Clinical Presentation and Diagnosis

Basketball athletes with patellar chondromalacia commonly report anterior knee pain, retropatellar discomfort, pain during stair climbing or descending, pain on squatting, pain after prolonged sitting, and symptom aggravation during jumping or landing. Crepitus, transient swelling, and a sensation of grinding may also be present. However, symptom severity does not necessarily correlate with the extent of cartilage damage on MRI (Willy et al., 2019).

Diagnosis should begin with a careful history focused on symptom behavior, training load, aggravating tasks, previous knee injuries, and fluctuations across the season. Physical examination should assess patellar mobility and tenderness, lower-limb alignment, quadriceps and hip muscle performance, flexibility, ankle range of motion, and dynamic movement patterns such as the single-leg squat, step-down task, or landing test. In basketball athletes, dynamic tasks often reveal more clinically relevant deficits than static alignment alone (Willy et al., 2019).

Clinical practice guidelines for patellofemoral pain emphasize that symptom provocation during patellofemoral loading tasks remains a cornerstone of diagnosis. No single special test is sufficient. Instead, clinicians should integrate symptoms, task-related pain, function, and physical findings to build a coherent diagnosis. This is particularly important in athletic populations, where isolated imaging findings are common (Willy et al., 2019).

Imaging Assessment: Value and Limitations

MRI is the most useful imaging modality for evaluating patellar chondromalacia because it can visualize cartilage surface irregularity, fissures, focal defects, subchondral bone marrow changes, Hoffa fat pad abnormalities, and coexisting tendon pathology. In addition to conventional MRI, quantitative techniques such as T1ρ and T2 mapping can reveal early biochemical cartilage changes before gross morphologic damage becomes obvious (Masroori et al., 2024). For basketball athletes, MRI may be especially valuable when symptoms persist despite conservative care, when mechanical symptoms suggest focal chondral injury, or when structural decision-making is required before surgery. Nevertheless, the high prevalence of asymptomatic MRI abnormalities in athletic populations means that imaging results must always be interpreted alongside symptoms and function. Overreliance on imaging may lead to overdiagnosis, unnecessary restriction, or poorly targeted treatment (Pappas et al., 2016; Gao et al., 2021). Accordingly, a symptom-function-imaging model is preferable. Imaging can refine the diagnosis and assist in prognosis, but it should not replace clinical reasoning. Selective use of imaging is more appropriate than routine imaging for every athlete with anterior knee pain (Neal et al., 2024).

Conservative Management

Current evidence supports conservative treatment as the first-line management strategy for most athletes with patellar chondromalacia or patellofemoral pain related to cartilage overload. Education, training-load modification, and individualized exercise therapy form the core of care. Athletes should understand that pain does not always indicate irreversible damage, that total rest is usually unnecessary, and that graded loading is often beneficial when carefully monitored (Neal et al., 2024; Willy et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2018). Exercise therapy should combine knee-focused and hip-focused strengthening, with emphasis on quadriceps capacity, hip

abductor and external rotator strength, trunk control, and progressive functional loading. Eccentric and isometric quadriceps exercises may be useful when pain limits performance, while later stages should integrate squatting, stepping, landing, deceleration, and change-of-direction tasks relevant to basketball. Movement retraining should address dynamic valgus, landing stiffness, and poor shock absorption strategies (Willy et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2018).

Load modification is equally important. Temporary reductions in high-irritability activities, such as repeated maximal jumping, deep knee flexion under load, dense scrimmage volume, and excessive conditioning, may be necessary. However, the goal is not prolonged unloading but controlled reloading based on pain response, swelling, and performance tolerance (Neal et al., 2024). Adjunctive interventions may be considered in selected cases. Patellar taping may provide short-term symptom relief and improve perceived tracking, foot orthoses may help when excessive pronation or load distribution issues are present, and manual therapy may be used to facilitate exercise participation. These interventions should be viewed as supportive rather than primary treatments (Collins et al., 2018).

Surgical Management and Return to Sport

Surgery should be reserved for athletes who fail a well-structured course of conservative treatment and who demonstrate clear structural pathology or biomechanical abnormalities that justify operative intervention. Potential surgical options include chondroplasty, marrow-stimulation techniques, osteochondral grafting, cartilage restoration procedures, and selected realignment procedures when maltracking or instability contribute substantially to joint overload (Brittberg, 2024; Matsushita et al., 2023). Decision-making should account for lesion size, depth, location, symptom duration, alignment status, athlete age, competitive level, and the demands of the sport. Because basketball requires repeated high-impact loading, successful return to sport depends not only on tissue healing but also on restoration of strength, power, landing quality, and workload tolerance (Brittberg, 2024; Matsushita et al., 2023).

Modern return-to-sport frameworks emphasize criteria-based progression rather than time alone. Pain and effusion should be well controlled, lower-limb strength asymmetry should be minimized, functional hop and landing performance should be acceptable, and the athlete should tolerate progressive basketball-specific drills before unrestricted return. Psychological readiness and confidence in the knee should also be considered (Lorentz et al., 2024).

Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The current evidence supports early recognition, individualized rehabilitation, and sport-specific load monitoring as key clinical priorities. In practice, this means screening athletes with recurrent anterior knee pain, monitoring abrupt increases in workload, and intervening before symptoms become persistent. Prevention programs should likely incorporate lower-limb strength training, landing mechanics coaching, mobility work, and sensible progression of jump and training volume (Neal et al., 2024; Willy et al., 2019). Future research should clarify the relationship between early quantitative MRI-detected biochemical cartilage changes and long-term symptoms or osteoarthritis risk in basketball players. Prospective sport-specific cohort studies are also needed to determine which combinations of biomechanics, structure, and workload best predict progression from transient patellofemoral pain to clinically meaningful cartilage degeneration (Gao et al., 2021; Pappas et al., 2016; Eijkenboom et al., 2020; Eijkenboom et al., 2019).

Table 1. Practical Clinical Summary for Patellar Chondromalacia in Basketball Athletes

Domain	Key Points	Clinical Relevance
Epidemiology	Basketball athletes have substantial exposure to patellofemoral overload and a high prevalence of structural knee abnormalities on MRI.	Symptoms should be monitored proactively even when athletes remain active in training and competition.
Mechanisms	Repeated jumping, landing, deceleration, maltracking, and neuromuscular deficits increase cartilage stress.	Assessment should consider load, alignment, and movement quality together.
Assessment	Diagnosis relies on symptoms, function, physical examination, and selective imaging.	MRI helps define structure but should not be interpreted in isolation.
Conservative care	Education, load modification, and combined hip- and knee-focused exercise therapy are first-line treatments.	Rehabilitation should be progressive and sport specific.
Return to sport	Criteria-based progression is preferred over time-based clearance alone.	Athletes should demonstrate strength, landing control, and tolerance to basketball-specific drills.

D. Conclusion

Patellar chondromalacia in basketball athletes is a clinically relevant patellofemoral disorder that emerges from the interaction of repetitive mechanical overload, anatomical alignment factors, neuromuscular deficits, and training-load mismanagement. The condition may coexist with or lie beneath the broader clinical picture of patellofemoral pain, and both symptomatic and asymptomatic structural abnormalities are common in basketball players (Kamat et al., 2022; Masroori et al., 2024; Eijkenboom et al., 2020). Diagnosis should not rely solely on imaging. Instead, clinicians should integrate history, symptom provocation, functional tasks, physical examination, and selective MRI when indicated. Conservative management remains the first-line treatment and should prioritize education, gradual load modification, and progressive exercise therapy addressing both hip and knee function within the demands of basketball (Neal et al., 2024; Willy et al., 2019; Collins et al., 2018). Surgical treatment is reserved for refractory cases with well-defined structural pathology. Overall, early recognition and individualized rehabilitation may improve symptom resolution, reduce recurrence, and potentially protect long-term patellofemoral joint health in basketball athletes (Lorentz et al., 2024).

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