CASE REPORT

Could kinesiology taping help mitigate pain, breathlessness and abdominal-related symptoms in cancer?

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SUMMARY

We present the case of a woman who was an amateur athlete diagnosed with primary breast cancer, and 10 years later with terminal metastatic cancer. This case report was prepared posthumously in co-operation with her next of kin (husband). The patient first presented to a sports physiotherapist (AR) for her pain-management and to help maintain physical fitness so that she could continue with sports and an active lifestyle. The patient continued with physiotherapy for several months to enable her to be active. However, when her health deteriorated significantly due to advancing cancer, the treatment was modified and aimed at improving the patient’s general well-being. The physiotherapist applied kinesiology tape over the patient’s lower rib cage, diaphragm and abdomen in an attempt to manage pain, breathlessness and abdominal bloating. The patient reported alleviation of pain, breathlessness, abdominal discomfort and nausea, accompanied by improvements in eating, drinking, energy levels and physical function.

BACKGROUND

The global burden of cancer is significant and on the rise,1 and symptoms associated with cancer especially in advanced stages are burdensome. Symptom management is challenging yet critically important in the continuum of cancer care.2–5 The most common cancer-related symptoms include pain, fatigue, lack of energy, anorexia/weight loss, constipation, dyspnoea, nausea/vomiting, bloating and oedema,6–9 and they adversely affect physical, psychosocial and spiritual well-being and diminish quality of life.2,8,9 The trade-off between symptom relief and adverse effects associated with pharmacotherapy may not be desirable for patients who are undergoing or have gone through intensive anticancer therapy. Non-pharmacological alternatives have become important adjuncts to pharmacotherapy.

Kinesiology taping is a non-pharmacological therapeutic technique that involves application of an elastic adhesive cotton-based tape on to the skin. Kinesiology taping was developed in 1970s by Kenzo Kase, a chiropractor for rehabilitation of musculoskeletal injuries,10 and the technique has gained popularity following its use by high-profile sports people in major sporting events including the Olympics.11 Nowadays physical and sports therapists, nurses, chiropractors and osteopaths use kinesiology taping to manage musculoskeletal-related pain, cancer-related lymphoedema and stroke-related spasticity.12–14 Kinesiology tape can be purchased without prescription and is available in variety of shapes, sizes, colours and patterns. Kinesiology tape is made of water-resistant material and can be worn for 3–5 days while bathing and other activities.11 13 Kinesiology tape differs from conventional zinc-oxide adhesive tape as it can be stretched longitudinally up to 60% of its resting length and therefore can support soft tissues and joints without restricting movements.16

Manufacturers and advocates claim that the elastic property of kinesiology taping generates convolutions of the skin when in situ and that this improves blood and lymphatic microcirculation reducing pain and swelling.14 16 They claim that kinesiology taping causes exaggerated stretching and recoiling of the skin during movement and this stimulates low threshold cutaneous mechanoreceptors generating afferent impulses that inhibit nociceptive input that is, closing of the ‘pain gate’.14 16 They also claim that kinesiology taping modulates myofascial tone resulting in rehabilitative benefits for musculoskeletal injuries.11 16 At present there is a paucity of scientific evidence to judge the merits of these claims.

There are at least 22 systematic reviews, some with meta-analysis, that have evaluated the efficacy of kinesiology taping, predominantly for musculoskeletal-related outcomes including pain. These 22 reviews include 95 studies with 3336 participants (table 1). Evidence from recent systematic reviews suggests that kinesiology taping is beneficial for non-acute musculoskeletal-related pain and disability when compared with minimal or no intervention controls.14 17–19 A systematic review with meta-analysis on cancer-related lymphoedema found no significant difference between kinesiology taping and compression therapies for reducing lymph volume.20 Kinesiology taping was superior to compression for improving lymphoedema-related symptoms; however, bandaging was associated with higher quality of life. It was also reported that kinesiology taping was associated with skin-related complications in up to 21% of patients. It was recommended that kinesiology taping be used with caution in patients where bandaging cannot be used.

Two systematic reviews,12 13 included a study by Tsai et al.35 that evaluated the effect of kinesiology taping for cancer-related lymphoedema. Tsai et al.35 found no differences between kinesiology taping and non-elasticated bandage for the reduction of moderate to severe breast cancer

To cite: Banerjee G, Rose A, Briggs M, et al. BMJ Case Rep 2017. doi:10.1136/bcr-2016-216695

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Accepted 11 February 2017

BMJ Case Reports: first published as 10.1136/bcr-2016-216695 on 24 February 2017. Downloaded from http://casereports.bmj.com/ on 16 December 2023 by guest. Protected by copyright.
### Table 1  Summary of systematic reviews and pooled analysis

| Study | Population | Intervention | Outcome Measures |
|-------|------------|--------------|------------------|
| Montalvo et al<sup>a</sup><sup>11</sup> | n=13; MSK pain | KT | Not effective |
| | *KT not superior to other treatments; has limited potential for pain reduction which may not be clinically meaningful |
| Parreira Pdo et al<sup>a</sup><sup>12</sup> | n=12; MSK pain, disability, QoL, return to work, global impression of recovery | KT | Inconclusive/conflicting |
| | *KT not superior to other treatments, sham and placebo; effect sizes too small to have clinical significance |
| Csapo and Alegre<sup>13</sup> | n=19; muscle strength in healthy population | KT | Not effective Inconclusive/conflicting |
| | *KT has no/negligible effects on muscle strength |
| Vanti et al<sup>a</sup><sup>14</sup> | n=8 [NET(n=2)+KT (n=6)]; spinal pain and disability | KT | Effective |
| | *KT has no immediate effect on reducing low back pain and disability; small effect for neck pain reduction which may not be clinically relevant |
| Bassett et al<sup>a</sup><sup>15</sup> | n=3; MSK pain, muscle performance | KT | Effective |
| | *Insufficient evidence |
| Mostafaviar et al<sup>a</sup><sup>11</sup> | n=6; MSK pain, function, strength, performance | KT | Effective |
| | * Insufficient evidence; KT is a safe modality |
| Williams et al<sup>a</sup><sup>16</sup> | n=10; MSK pain, ROM, proprioception, muscle strength | KT | Effective |
| | *Small beneficial effect on strength, force sense error and active ROM; insufficient evidence for pain, ankle proprioception and muscle activity |
| Morris et al<sup>a</sup><sup>17</sup> | n=6; MSK pain, ROM, disability, function | KT | Inconclusive/conflicting |
| | *n=1; cancer-related lymphedema |
| | *n=1; stroke-related spasticity |
| | *Limited evidence for short-term plantar fasciitis-related pain reduction; limited/insufficient evidence KT not superior to other treatments for lymphedema and other outcomes |
| Kalron and Bar-Sela<sup>a</sup><sup>18</sup> | n=9; MSK pain, muscle strength, ROM | KT | Effective |
| | *n=2; cancer-related lymphedema and oedema |
| | *n=1; stroke-related spasticity |
| | *Moderate evidence for short-term pain reduction but not for long-term; no/inconclusive evidence for muscle strength, ROM, oedema/lymphedema and spasticity |
| Méndez-Rebolledo et al<sup>a</sup><sup>19</sup> | n=6; PFPS | KT | Effective |
| | *Insufficient evidence of quality |
| Dejeanbrongs-Charboneau et al<sup>a</sup><sup>20</sup> | n=10 [NET(n=4)+KT (n=6)]; SIS/RotCuffTend | KT | Inconclusive/conflicting |
| | *KT significantly improved pain-free ROM however insufficient evidence to judge efficacy as standalone/adjunct |
| Beatriz and Rafael<sup>a</sup><sup>21</sup> | n=12; PFPS | KT | Inconclusive/conflicting |
| | *Insufficient evidence; KT is inexpensive with no side effects and can be used alongside other therapies |
| Gramprunohit et al<sup>a</sup><sup>22</sup> | n=15 [NET (n=13)+KT (n=2)]; post-stroke outcomes | KT | Inconclusive/conflicting |
| | *Inconclusive evidence for pain, ROM, muscle tone, strength or function |
| Gatt et al<sup>a</sup><sup>23</sup> | n=6; cancer-related lymphedema | KT | Effective |
| | *No significant difference between KT and compression bandaging/hosiery; KT should be used with caution when bandaging cannot be used |
| Nelson 2016<sup>a</sup><sup>24</sup> | n=5; chronic low back pain | KT | Effective |
| | *KT is beneficial as an adjunct to traditional PT/exercise (moderate evidence that KT not more effective than conventional PT/exercise for reducing pain and disability as standalone/adjunct; insufficient/limited evidence that KT superior to sham for reducing pain, disability and ROM) |

<sup>1</sup>Author, Year; n=number of included studies; Outcome Measures.

<sup>*Additional comments.</sup>

<sup>†</sup>Studies evaluating effectiveness of taping in general which includes kinesiology (elastic) taping and non-elastic taping.

<sup>‡</sup>Studies evaluating effectiveness of interventions for shoulder impingement syndrome that include kinesiology taping, pharmacotherapy and surgery.

<sup>§</sup>Study is a pooled analysis.

KT, kinesiology taping; MSK, musculoskeletal; NET, non-elastic taping; PFPS, patellofemoral pain syndrome; PT, physical therapy; QoL, quality of life; ROM, range of motion; SIS/RotCuffTend, shoulder impingement syndrome/rotator cuff tendinopathy.
related-lymphoedema. In addition, kinesiology taping was found more comfortable and convenient to apply than bandage, and could be worn for longer duration of time. Previously, we have reported the findings of a literature review of studies that have evaluated the use of kinesiology taping for cancer.40 Five of seven studies with a comparison group found that kinesiology taping may be a useful addition to decongestive therapy for managing breast cancer-related stage 1 or 2 lymphoedema, including reduction in pain and improvement in upper limb range of motion (ROM).35 37-39 Two studies on the other hand found that kinesiology taping was not superior to the multilayered bandaging when combined with manual lymphatic drainage and pneumatic compression for reducing breast cancer-related stage 2 or 3 lymphoedema.40 41 Nevertheless, kinesiology taping was associated with improvements in limb volume reduction and upper limb ROM,40 which could be of clinical relevance in patients that are ill-suited to the multilayered bandaging. Overall, it seems kinesiology taping may not be superior to existing therapies for lymphoedema management but may be useful in select patients with early stage I and II lymphoedema. Thus, expert groups support the use of kinesiology taping as an adjunct for managing lymphoedema.42 43 Since the publication of the most recent systematic review, Imperatori et al,44 have published a randomised controlled clinical trial that found the addition of kinesiology taping to standard postoperative analgesia produced greater relief of immediate and long-term (30 days postoperative) lobectomy-associated chest pain compared with the addition of dressing tape. Kinesiology taping was not associated with any adverse effects and it was concluded that kinesiology taping was a safe and effective auxiliary technique for the management of postoperative chest pain after lung lobectomy. This provides further evidence that kinesiology taping may have a role as an adjunct in the management of pain and other symptoms in the continuum of cancer care.45

In this case report, we describe the use of kinesiology taping to manage pain, breathlessness and abdominal discomfort for a woman diagnosed with secondary breast cancer.

CASE PRESENTATION

The following is a case presentation based on clinical notes and diary entries of a patient who was treated by a physiotherapist (AR).

In 2006, an amateur woman athlete in her early 40s self-referred to a specialist sports physiotherapist (AR) at a private clinic to seek relief from hip pain and for help preparing for a 3000 miles cycling challenge. The patient had been diagnosed with primary breast cancer in 1990, for which she underwent lumpectomy and 3 years later mastectomy, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. In 2000, the patient received a diagnosis of terminal breast cancer with malignant metastatic tumours of the lungs, liver and bone.

In 2007, the patient presented unwell to AR following completion of the cycling challenge and chemotherapy. The patient reported ‘low’ levels of energy, ‘severe’ nausea, ‘moderate to severe’ breathlessness and ‘severe’ abdominal bloating. She also reported anterior rib, mid thoracic, sacral and left-sided pelvic pain, night sweats that soaked the bed and reduced muscle strength that had negatively affected her daily living activities. She rated her mood as ‘low’. The patient was scheduled for further sessions of chemotherapy and vertebroplasty to treat vertebral compression fractures the lower cervical and midthoracic spinal region that had resulted from the metastases.

On palpation the patient’s right lower lobe of the liver felt enlarged, solid, tender and relatively immobile. The liver was pressing into the abdominal area and affecting the diaphragmatic excursion. The patient’s rib expansion was poor and relatively immobile in the midinhalation position with the work of breathing mainly through the upper ribs. The paraspinal muscles were in spasm. The patient reported that nausea was making it very difficult to eat and drink, and when she was able to eat, she felt very bloated afterwards. The patient sipped protein drinks to maintain strength so that she could partake in family and social gatherings. The patient’s pain was being managed by fentanyl patches, oramorph (for breakthrough pain), paracetamol and meloxicam.

In this first physiotherapy consultation, the patient was too unwell to be given ‘hands-on’ physiotherapy treatment. Therefore, kinesiology taping was applied in an attempt to mitigate pain and breathlessness and abdominal discomfort associated with swelling/œdema. It was believed that kinesiology taping may help to support the abdomen and thorax and aid respiratory movements. The elastic nature of kinesiology tape was seen as an advantage over other types of tape which can restrict movement. The patient was very willing to try kinesiology taping. AR conducted a telephone consultation with a physiotherapy colleague who had experience of treating similar patients with kinesiology taping to determine an appropriate kinesiology taping technique.

TREATMENT

The kinesiology tape was cut to create a series of thin strips ‘fans’ and applied over the patient’s rib cage, diaphragm and abdomen to support drainage of accumulated fluids (figures 1–3). Kinesiology tape was applied when the patient held the inspiration phase of the breathing cycle, with the tape stretched to ∼10–20% of its original length. The ‘fans’ of the kinesiology tape were directed towards the base of axilla and anchored in the vicinity of axillary lymph nodes.

The patient was advised to continue as normal with pain medication. It was agreed that the patient would return to clinic for follow-up in 5 days after which she would be assessed at home at ∼10 day intervals. The patient was advised to leave kinesiology tape in situ for 7 to 10 days or unless she wished to remove it because of the tape becoming uncomfortable to continue wearing, any skin reactions or the tape started to become slack and detach from the skin of its own accord. The patient had been instructed to remove the tape if there were any adverse skin effects like itching, rash or discomfort.

OUTCOME AND FOLLOW-UP

The patient presented to clinic for her second physiotherapy consultation 5 days after the initial consultation. The patient was very cheerful and reported that she was feeling markedly better with mood rated as ‘moderate to high’. The patient was breathing easier and she rated reductions in breathlessness ‘moderate to mild’, abdominal bloating ‘mild’ and nausea ‘mild’. The patient reported that she was better able to eat and drink and this made her feel more energised. She rated her energy levels as ‘high’. Pain in the anterior ribcage area where the kinesiology tape had been applied was reduced. Pain in the sacral-pelvic region was unchanged and controlled by analgesic medication. The old kinesiology tape was removed from the skin and the patient treated with gentle soft tissue therapy of the lower ribs, upper right quadrant of the abdomen overlaying the liver and the posterior abdomen in the region of the upper lumbar and lower thoracic vertebrae overlaying the kidneys. This involved applying
gentle pressure to, and stretching and massage of, underlying structures using osteopathic techniques. The aim of soft tissue therapy was to relieve pain and discomfort and improve mobility and functional activities including breathing. After this, the kinesiology tape was applied using the same technique as the first consultation.

The third consultation was a home-visit undertaken by a different physiotherapist 15 days after the second consultation. The patient had removed the tape after 8 days and reported that improvement in symptoms had been maintained between the treatment sessions. New kinesiology tape was applied using the same technique as at the first consultation.

The fourth physiotherapy consultation was a home-visit that took place 17 days after the third consultation (ie, 36 days after the initial physiotherapy consultation). The patient appeared very fatigued which was attributed to recent chemotherapy. The patient asserted that kinesiology taping had made a ‘huge difference’ reporting that she had experienced reductions in rib pain, nausea, bloating and breathless. On assessment, there was restricted mobility of the rib, liver, diaphragm and there was restricted posterior–anterior mobility of the quadratus lumbarum. The patient was treated as previously with gentle soft tissue therapy and was taught breathing exercises. Old kinesiology tape was replaced with new kinesiology tape using the same technique as at the first physiotherapy consultation.

The patient chose not to receive further chemotherapy after the fourth physiotherapy consultation. The patient’s status remained stable over the next month during which three home-consultations took place that is, 48, 62 and 69 days respectively after the initial physiotherapy consultation. At each visit gentle soft tissue therapy and kinesiology taping was administered. The patient continued to report benefits from kinesiology taping and symptoms remained stable with breathlessness rated as ‘moderate to mild’, nausea as ‘mild’ and abdominal bloating as ‘mild’. Energy and mood was rated as ‘moderate to high’ and pain in the anterior ribcage area and sacral-pelvic region unchanged.

During the next 2 months the patient’s health deteriorated more noticeably due to the advancing cancer disease.

Figure 1  Sketches of the location of kinesiology taping from the physiotherapy case notes.
patient received five home consultations during this time. Kinesiology taping was administered during each consultation in conjunction with extremely gentle hands-on physiotherapy until the final two treatments where only kinesiology taping was deemed appropriate. Throughout the course of kinesiology taping treatment no adverse effect was reported by the patient. The patient was extremely unwell at the last home consultation (134 days after the first consultation) and she did not wish further physiotherapy. At this point the patient realised how ill she was and that she was nearing the end of her life.

DISCUSSION

There are a few case reports and case series that have investigated the use of kinesiology taping in cancer. Those that exist have found kinesiology taping to be associated with improvements in cancer-related lymphoedema,47–53 pain,48 ROM of the upper limb,47–49 muscle tightness/heaviness/discomfort,47–48–50 tissue texture49–52 and upper limb function and disability.50–54 Other noticeable findings in the literature were that kinesiology taping could be an alternate choice for patients who are unsuitable for decongestive lymphoedema therapy,48–51 and could be used for ‘challenging areas’ of the body, although there was concern about hygiene associated with the tape in situ.49

A clinical study (n=24),54 found that kinesiology taping was not associated with reductions in lymph volume in patients with breast cancer; however, it was reported by the patients that they felt more confident when performing daily activities and this resulted in improvements of upper limb functionality. A patient in that study reported peeling of the skin and redness. In a pretest and post-test study (n=14),55 no differences were observed between kinesiology taping and compression sleeves for outcome measures that included quality of life scores, symptom intensity, arm volume and satisfaction of treatment in patients with breast cancer. It was concluded that kinesiology taping may be a possible alternative to compression sleeve for managing upper limb lymphoedema.

Kinesiology taping has also been found to be useful for managing pain in cancer conditions. Two case reports,56–57 found that kinesiology taping added to soft tissue therapies and exercise reduced pain, improved joint ROM, physical function and quality of life in four elderly patients with secondary breast cancer (n=2), advanced lung cancer (n=1), and multiple myeloma (n=1). It was reported by all patients that they were satisfied with kinesiology taping treatment. In a case of a middle-aged woman who underwent partial glossectomy and neck dissection following tongue cancer,58 kinesiology taping added to manual therapy, exercise and patient education reduced cervical spine region pain and improved shoulder ROM, muscle strength and function.

In a recent case report by Banerjee et al (n=1),59 it was found that the addition of kinesiology taping to soft tissue therapy significantly reduced musculoskeletal pain (by ~50%) and ‘tearing’ and ‘searing’–like sensations (by ~85%) compared with pre-treatment in a patient with secondary breast cancer. The patient felt greater control and stability over her left shoulder region where the kinesiology tape was applied which resulted in better functioning of the upper limb. The patient reported no adverse effects.

Given the evidence that is available to date, we speculate that kinesiology taping could be useful in cancer conditions for mitigating pain and symptoms secondary to oedematous conditions (eg, pleural effusion and ascites) such as breathlessness, abdominal bloating, nausea and lack of energy. Kinesiology taping could also be useful in instances where support to the soft...
tissues or biomechanical alignment is required—for example, rotator cuff tendinopathy,\textsuperscript{19} and patellofemoral pain syndrome.\textsuperscript{17, 28}

The patient in our case reported significant improvements in abdominal-related symptoms, breathlessness and pain after the use of kinesiology taping, which contributed to better physical functioning that improved quality of life. However, a cause-effect relationship cannot be established and there is evidence that other types of therapeutic tape have been associated with pain relief in patellofemoral pain syndrome,\textsuperscript{60–62} so any putative effect may not be specific to kinesiology taping per se. Nevertheless, there is better skin tolerance to kinesiology taping than other therapeutic tapes.\textsuperscript{18, 28}

In conclusion, kinesiology taping could be as useful as an adjunct in the continuum of cancer care. It offers important advantages that include low-cost and over-the-counter availability. Kinesiology taping can be administered by carers or by patients themselves as this technique is relatively easy to learn. This empowers patients to self-manage their symptoms. Precautions to using kinesiology taping include allergy to the tape, open wounds, frail skin, dermatological (e.g., eczema) and vascular diseases (deep vein thrombosis).\textsuperscript{46} Some manufacturers have raised fear of spreading cancer because of improvements in lymphatic and blood circulation due to kinesiology taping in patients with active cancer; further research is warranted. We hope that this case will generate interest among oncology and palliative/supportive care health professionals and researchers to evaluate this therapy further.

Learning points

- Kinesiology taping is an easy-to-apply therapeutic technique that is used by healthcare professionals including physical therapists and nurses to manage lymphoedema and associated outcomes including pain.
- Kinesiology tape can be bought over-the-counter and is relatively easy to apply by a carer or patient. This infers less reliance on healthcare professionals and use of resources.
- Kinesiology taping could be useful in select patients with cancer as an adjunct for managing pain and symptoms secondary to oedema and this could improve physical function and quality of life. The most serious adverse effect appears to be mild-to-moderate irritation of the skin, for example, red, tender and peeling skin on removal of the tape.
- The mechanism of action is uncertain, although we suspect that the tape may provide support to body structures (e.g., splinting) without restricting movement and this alleviates abdominal discomfort and breathlessness.
- The subjective improvement in symptoms in this case suggests that further research using validated instruments and objective measures might be useful to assess the potential benefit of kinesiology taping for others.
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