

1 **Establishing outcome measures in early knee osteoarthritis**

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62 **Abstract**

63 The classification and monitoring of individuals with early OA is an important strategy for the design and  
64 evaluation of therapeutic interventions. Such an approach requires the identification of appropriate  
65 outcomes measures. Potential outcome measures for early OA include patient-reported outcomes (such

66 as measures of pain, function or quality of life), features of clinical examination (such as joint line  
67 tenderness and crepitus (that is, grating and crackling sounds)), objective measures of physical function,  
68 levels of physical activity, movement biomechanics, structural assessments such as magnetic resonance  
69 imaging (MRI) and body fluid biomarkers. Patient characteristics such as adiposity and biomechanics of  
70 the knee could also have relevance to early OA. Importantly, future research is needed to enable the  
71 selection of outcome measures that are feasible, reliable, and validated in those at risk of OA and an early  
72 knee OA population. In this Perspectives paper, potential outcome measures of individuals with early  
73 symptomatic knee osteoarthritis (OA) are discussed, including those that could be of use in clinical practice  
74 as well as research settings.

75

## 76 **[H1] Introduction**

77 Osteoarthritis (OA) is a leading cause of chronic pain, disability, and health care utilization, with knee OA  
78 contributing the greatest burden<sup>1-4</sup>. OA is associated with increased rates of comorbidity (for example,  
79 obesity and heart disease)<sup>1</sup> and ranks the 13<sup>th</sup> 2 most burdensome amongst all forms of disability world-  
80 wide. The incidence and burden of OA is considerable and growing<sup>3, 5</sup>. Therefore, a shift in the treatment  
81 approach is needed from treating patients once they have established OA to a proactive approach that  
82 focuses on mitigating risk factors. The classification and monitoring of early OA, on a trajectory from  
83 normal to symptomatic and/or radiographic OA, would provide an opportunity in clinical practice and  
84 research for the development and evaluation of interventions to prevent or slow down the disease process  
85 at a time it is probably more amenable to modification.

86 Although the definition of early OA and appropriate outcomes are under development OA is probably  
87 heterogeneous in terms of its presentation and progression. Knee OA might progress slowly over a period  
88 of ten or more years, rapidly, or not at all<sup>6</sup>. Predicting the development and progression of disease through  
89 identifying risk factors and mechanisms of OA is important in chronic disease management to inform  
90 targeted OA prevention and treatment strategies. This strategy is difficult because of the heterogeneous

91 presentation of OA; however, the availability of increasingly sophisticated statistical and computational  
92 methods, microsimulation modelling, and large population-based cohort studies make this approach  
93 increasingly viable. For example, widely-used online prediction tools are now available for evaluating  
94 future risk of osteoporotic fractures and for guiding clinicians in preventive management of osteoporosis<sup>7-  
95 9</sup>. Comparable reliable and validated outcomes for early OA will inform the evaluation of risk factors for  
96 the progression of early OA. More than one set of risk factors and models will probably be needed to  
97 predict early OA in the future. The Rotterdam and Chingford studies (two prospective population-based  
98 studies) have demonstrated an ability to predict incident radiographic knee OA using a combination of  
99 clinical, genetic, and radiographic factors<sup>10</sup>. When performing risk assessment and creating a predictive  
100 model for early knee OA, many aspects need to be considered: the definitions of the outcome and  
101 prognostic factors; the duration of the clinically relevant prediction period; and the setting in which the  
102 risk prediction tool will be used (for example, primary care, secondary care or a research setting). For  
103 instance, expensive and intensive predictive tools such as MRI scans and biomarkers might be restricted  
104 to secondary care and/or a research setting.

105 In this Perspectives article, we highlight considerations for best practice in the selection of outcome  
106 measures for use in clinical and research settings to evaluate patients at initial presentation of early knee  
107 OA across different outcome domains: patient-reported outcomes, clinical examination, physical function,  
108 adiposity, physical activity, nutrition, biomechanical outcomes, imaging features and biochemical markers  
109 <sup>11</sup>. We suggest outcome measures that could be considered for use in individuals with early knee OA in  
110 clinical care and research settings using published evidence (primarily from post-traumatic and established  
111 OA populations), emerging evidence (ongoing studies), and clinical expertise (Box 1). The outcome  
112 measures highlighted are relevant to individuals that are at risk of OA and fit the provisional criteria for  
113 early knee OA based on patient reported outcomes of pain and function, together with clinical signs (joint  
114 line tenderness or crepitus) and a radiographic Kellgren-Lawrence (KL) grade of 0-1<sup>12</sup>. Although proposed  
115 as important evidence-informed clinical outcome measures, these outcome measures will require

116 additional validation and possible modification to suit local primary care and other healthcare settings, as  
117 well as periodical updates.

118

### 119 **Patient-reported outcomes**

120 Patient-reported outcomes are any report of a patient's health status that comes directly from the patient  
121 without interpretation by others (for example, the clinician). These measures commonly take the form of  
122 a questionnaire. Most relevant patient-reported outcome measures have been developed to either assess  
123 individuals with a knee injury (for example, International Knee Documentation Committee 2000  
124 (IKDC2000)) or established OA (for example, Western Ontario and McMaster Osteoarthritis Index  
125 (WOMAC)); although, one questionnaire has been developed to cover the full spectrum from injury to  
126 established OA (the Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS)). The relative merits of these  
127 and other available instruments that measure self-reported pain, function, and quality of life have been  
128 the subject of previous reviews<sup>13, 14</sup>. Today measures, such as PROMIS, are often developed using  
129 computer adaptive strategies which may also prove to be relevant for use in people with early OA<sup>15</sup>. Many  
130 of the considerations that influence the choice of measure in established OA (for example, respondent  
131 burden, cost or availability) apply also in early OA.

132 Ultra-brief (one or two domains) unidimensional generic measures, such as the 11-point Numerical Rating  
133 Scale (NRS-11), the 36-Item short form health survey (SF-36) bodily pain scale (SF-BP 36), have been  
134 recommended in previous reviews for established OA<sup>16</sup> and are probably applicable also in early OA.  
135 However, the disadvantage of generic health status measures is a restricted view of the pain character and  
136 intensity<sup>16, 17</sup>, which is probably inappropriate based on emerging evidence from qualitative studies in  
137 patients with early knee OA<sup>18-20</sup>. For instance, these patients report that their initial symptoms can be  
138 experienced as 'an awareness' of the knee, loss of confidence, or needing to 'be careful' as opposed to  
139 'pain'. The KOOS knee-related quality of life subscale includes consideration of questions on these aspects

140 <sup>14,15</sup>. Further, reporting OA pain as ‘constant’ or ‘present on most days’ might give floor effects (i.e., most  
141 individuals may report at the lower end of the scale) in early OA as these patients often report episodic  
142 and intermittent pain with certain activities. For example, pain during ascending or descending stairs  
143 seemed to be the earliest functional difficulty reported in the OA initiative<sup>21</sup>. Accordingly, the intermittent  
144 and constant assessment of pain score (ICOAP) questionnaire, which includes a subscale on intermittent  
145 symptoms, has an increasing amount of evidence supporting its’ reliability and validity.<sup>22</sup>.

146 Another important consideration is that the early phase of knee OA is often associated with the emergence  
147 of adaptive behaviour. Symptom frequency and intensity might be minimized through the selection of  
148 behaviours (for example, performing some activities less often), optimization of behaviours (for example,  
149 advanced planning of activities, including anticipatory analgesic use), and compensatory adaptations (for  
150 example, modifying the way activities are performed)<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, consideration of adaptive behaviour is  
151 a legitimate topic for outcome measurement in early OA<sup>24</sup>, an example of which is the Questionnaire to  
152 Identify Knee Symptoms (QuIKS). QuIKS includes questions such as “I am considering stopping a favorite  
153 activity due to my knees” and “I am considering changing my exercise routine due to my knee problems”<sup>25</sup>

154 The KOOS was developed for self-reporting of patient-relevant outcomes across the lifespan, from time of  
155 knee injury and potential knee OA onset to severe OA<sup>26-29</sup>. In five separate subscales this tool assesses  
156 perceived pain and other symptoms (e.g., stiffness, grinding, catching), perceived difficulty with function  
157 during daily life and sport and recreational activities, and knee-related quality of life. The KOOS  
158 measurement properties have been reported in studies of young, middle-aged, and elderly groups with  
159 knee injury or OA, and across the spectrum of treatments<sup>14</sup>. A comprehensive literature search identified  
160 37 eligible papers evaluating KOOS measurement properties in participants with knee injuries and/or  
161 osteoarthritis (OA) and found that KOOS demonstrates adequate content validity, internal consistency,  
162 test-retest reliability, construct validity and responsiveness for age- and condition-relevant subscales<sup>14</sup>.The  
163 KOOS is feasible to administer electronically and in paper form and KOOS scoring instructions and

164 population-based KOOS reference data are available. In addition, longitudinal KOOS data have been  
165 collected from more than 100,000 patients in surgical registries of anterior cruciate ligament  
166 reconstruction and knee replacement facilitating comparisons to many different populations<sup>30, 31</sup>. In  
167 addition, for the interested researcher, KOOS data are freely available and collected from the cohort of  
168 patients who are at increased risk of OA and the cohort of patients with established disease from the NIH-  
169 sponsored OA Initiative<sup>32</sup>. The OA initiative also collects a wide range of other self-reported, clinical and  
170 imaging data<sup>32</sup>. The “at risk “ cohort includes people with symptoms and two or more risk factors (including  
171 knee injury) but without radiographic OA<sup>32</sup>.

172 The ICOAP was designed to evaluate the pain experience in people with OA. It includes pain intensity,  
173 frequency, and impact on mood, sleep and quality of life. It is intended to be used alongside a measure of  
174 physical function<sup>22</sup>. OA-specific measures developed for more advanced OA cannot be assumed to have  
175 adequate psychometric properties when applied to early OA. Yet, the requirement for adequate  
176 performance in early OA must be balanced against the benefits for a coherent evidence base that comes  
177 from using common measures across the spectrum from early to advanced OA. Of existing measures, the  
178 KOOS and ICOAP seem to best strike this balance and are therefore strong candidates for evaluating early  
179 knee OA (Box 1), particularly as these instruments focus on different aspects; both have the advantage of  
180 being freely available. Published reviews of the psychometric properties of these two measures require  
181 systematic updating with specific attention to their performance in early OA.

182

### 183 **Clinical examination outcomes**

184 Clinical examination outcomes are relevant in research and are easy to perform in primary care. Joint line  
185 tenderness (tibiofemoral and/or patellofemoral joint lines) at baseline was suggested to be a strong  
186 predictor of five-year pain progression (moderate progression adjusted OR=3.9 (95% CI; 2.3 - 6.6)<sup>33</sup> in the  
187 CHECK cohort (n=705) that included patients with newly onset knee pain or stiffness<sup>34</sup>. Several studies



188 have evaluated the ability of physical signs to predict the clinical onset of structural radiographic OA in  
189 patients with an increased risk of OA<sup>33-37</sup>. Data from the HONEUR Study, which included 549 participants  
190 who were recruited at the first presentation of knee pain in primary care, suggested that joint line  
191 tenderness, crepitus (that is, grating, crackling, popping sounds), pain with passive flexion, and a self-  
192 reported swollen knee predicted incident radiographic tibiofemoral knee OA after 6 years<sup>35</sup>. Using MRI  
193 features of knee OA as an outcome measure, data from the general population Rotterdam Study showed  
194 that joint line tenderness together with the ‘feeling of giving way’ were associated with the incidence of  
195 tibiofemoral knee OA, whereas crepitus was identified as a good predictor of patellofemoral OA<sup>36, 37</sup>.

196 Easily assessable measures from physical examination might be associated with future OA development,  
197 including joint line tenderness and crepitus, even in the absence of radiologic findings of OA (Box 1).  
198 Clinical examination of these features had good inter-observer reliability in a population with evident knee  
199 osteoarthritis if a standardised approach to such assessment is used<sup>38</sup>. However, these clinical assessment  
200 components require further examination of reliability and validation for research settings in early knee OA  
201 and standardization for use in clinical settings.

## 202 **Physical function outcomes**

203 Given that the early pre-radiographic stage of OA is associated with intermittent symptoms and adaptive  
204 physical behaviour, the clinical evaluation of patients with, or at risk of, early knee OA should incorporate  
205 robust outcome measures of physical function<sup>39</sup>. Currently, no consensus exists regarding which outcomes  
206 are most relevant for use in this population. For the purposes of this Perspective article, physical function  
207 is operationally defined as ‘physiological functions’ or ‘the ability to move around and to perform daily  
208 activities’ that can be classified as ‘body functions and structure’ or ‘activities and participation’,  
209 respectively, using the World Health Organization International Classification of Functioning, Disability and  
210 Health (ICF) model<sup>40</sup>. As physical function is multi-dimensional, both performance-based and physical  
211 impairment measures (which might require specialized pieces of equipment and raters) are discussed in

212 this section. Emerging evidence suggest that some of these outcome measures might be suitable for the  
213 evaluation of early OA and those at risk of OA (Table 1)<sup>41-46</sup>.

214 A range of performance-based measures are available although the degree to which their measurement properties  
215 are established and the range of populations they have been used in varies (Table 1). Measures that have  
216 undergone fairly extensive investigation include the Single Leg Hop for distance test<sup>43, 44, 47-50</sup>, the Cross Hop for  
217 distance<sup>43, 47-50</sup>, the 6-meter Timed Hop Test<sup>43, 47-50</sup>, the Star Excursion and similar Y-balance test<sup>44, 51-55</sup>, the 30-  
218 second Chair Sit-to-Stand Test<sup>56-58</sup>, and the 6-minute walk test<sup>41, 42</sup>, while there is emerging evidence for the Vertical  
219 Drop Jump<sup>44, 59</sup>, the Single Leg Squat<sup>44, 60-62</sup>, Unipedal Dynamic Balance test<sup>44, 63</sup> and 20-meter Shuttle Run<sup>44, 64</sup>. The  
220 most commonly reported outcome of physical impairment is quadriceps muscle strength<sup>44, 47, 48, 51, 65</sup>, however,  
221 there might also be value in considering the strength of other lower extremity muscles including the hamstring, hip  
222 abductor and hip adductor muscle; although, insufficient information is available to advocate for specific  
223 contraction mode (i.e., isotonic, isokinetic or isometric) or type (i.e., concentric or eccentric).

224 Because of floor and ceiling effects (i.e., most individuals report a minimum – floor, or maximum – ceiling  
225 score), separate measures are required to cover the wide range of ages and abilities of patients with early  
226 knee OA in both clinical and research settings. Functional outcomes that should be considered for use in  
227 research and in clinical physical and exercise therapy practice based on their measurement properties and  
228 ability to span the full spectrum of patient age and abilities include the Single Leg Hop for distance, 30-  
229 second Chair Sit-to-Stand Test, 6-minute walk test and a quadriceps strength measure. The performance-  
230 based outcomes should be administered in a standardized, validated and reproducible fashion to enable  
231 detection of change over time; video demonstrations and explicit instructions for standardized testing are  
232 available online (see related links). Further research validating functional outcomes in ‘at risk’ (e.g., intra-  
233 articular knee injury, obesity, varus/valgus alignment abnormality) and ‘early-OA’ populations is required  
234 and this research should inform the periodic updating of these suggested functional outcomes.

235

236 **Modifiable lifestyle-related outcomes**

237 The presence of modifiable risk factors related to lifestyle, such as obesity, dietary inadequacies, and  
238 physical inactivity might lead to accelerated disease onset and progression through a combination of  
239 mechanical and systemic mechanisms<sup>66</sup>. Identifying these modifiable risk factors in early knee OA is  
240 important for the prevention of OA.

241 Several measures of adiposity or weight have been studied in established OA, but less so in early OA. These  
242 include BMI, waist-height ratio (WHR) and waist circumference<sup>67-71</sup>. The location of fat depots influences  
243 their metabolic and inflammatory potential and therefore may be important considerations. A high waist-  
244 height ratio or waist circumference (indicative of abdominal adiposity) were associated with an increased  
245 risk of OA progression<sup>71</sup>; however, neither outcome was associated with the loss of tibial or patellar  
246 cartilage volume or defects in adults in the community with pre-radiographic OA<sup>72,73</sup>. To detect a change  
247 in visceral fat at this early stage, more accurate assessments of abdominal adiposity are needed.  
248 Measurements of fat mass (kg), percentage fat mass (percentage of total mass) and fat mass index (FMI;  
249 fat mass/height<sup>2</sup>), can be obtained using dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry or bioelectrical impedance  
250 analysis, hence permitting a direct measure of adiposity<sup>74</sup>. Total fat mass is positively associated with an  
251 increased risk of knee cartilage defects and the presence of bone marrow lesions in healthy individuals  
252 (aged 25-60 years)<sup>75</sup> and medial tibiofemoral cartilage volume loss over 2-10 years in adults aged 51-81  
253 years<sup>76,77</sup>. A systematic review reported moderate evidence for the relationship between obesity (that is,  
254 increasing weight, BMI or total body fat mass) and the presence of bone marrow lesions in the knee in  
255 individuals with OA<sup>70</sup>. In addition to contributing to an increased mechanical load, adiposity is thought to  
256 have a metabolic and pro-inflammatory function in OA; therefore, a direct measure of adiposity (fat mass,  
257 percentage fat mass or FMI) rather than BMI, might be more useful in the assessment of early-stage OA<sup>78-</sup>  
258 <sup>81</sup>.

259 Physical activity is a modifiable outcome that might delay the onset of functional limitation, prevent  
260 obesity, and is essential for normal joint health<sup>82</sup>. In addition, physical activity can reduce pain and

261 disability among individuals with OA and increase their physical performance and self-efficacy<sup>83-85</sup>. Light or  
262 moderate intensity physical activity might protect against the onset of disability related to symptomatic  
263 OA, whereas a sedentary lifestyle or levels of strenuous physical activity is considered a risk factor<sup>86-88</sup>.  
264 Many variations of self-reported measures of physical activity exist including global or short recall  
265 questionnaires, although most have limited accuracy<sup>86-88</sup>. Wearable monitors that measure body motion  
266 can be used to assess physical activity and energy expenditure. The most commonly used sensor, validated  
267 across multiple populations, is an accelerometer (for example, Actigraph)<sup>89</sup>, which captures frequency,  
268 intensity, and duration of physical activity in a time-stamped manner. The large selection of off-the-shelf  
269 accelerometers, often contained in mobile phones, might be more suitable in a primary care setting to  
270 measure physical activity as they are less expensive, easier to use and widely available<sup>90, 91</sup>. Most  
271 accelerometers, however, are not validated to measure cycling or swimming. In general, objective  
272 measures of physical activity such as accelerometer outcomes compared with self-reporting have stronger  
273 relationships with function in OA<sup>92</sup> and are a more accurate assessment of physical activity and sedentary  
274 lifestyle.

275 Nutrition interventions such as weight loss<sup>93, 94</sup> are lifestyle-related changes that can potentially improve  
276 OA symptoms. Beyond the link between obesity and knee OA (and therefore the important contribution  
277 of weight loss)<sup>95, 96</sup>, the contribution of nutritional factors is an emerging and important area of research,  
278 although limited clinical evidence is available to date. For example, low dietary intakes of fibre<sup>97</sup> or omega-  
279 3 polyunsaturated fatty acids<sup>98</sup>, and high fat diets<sup>99</sup> are risk factors for OA and/or worsening of pain in OA  
280 and might therefore warrant monitoring in early OA. Many of the nutrients or dietary patterns tested to  
281 date probably contribute to pathology via alterations in body weight or inflammation, although the direct  
282 effects of these factors requires further investigation. The tools to monitor dietary intake are numerous  
283 (for example, the Food Frequency Questionnaire (FFQ), 24-hour dietary recall (either the paper-based or  
284 web-based automated self-administered 24-hour dietary recall (ASA24) assessment tools<sup>100</sup>) and the 3-

285 day or 7-day weighed food record) and need to be assessed for each clinical or research setting. In addition,  
286 tools to assess adherence to diets that reduce inflammation such as the Mediterranean Diet Adherence  
287 Screener<sup>101</sup> might also warrant use in future.

288 Hence, objective measures of adiposity are desirable. BMI is a useful outcome measure for assessing  
289 adiposity in a primary clinical setting because of its familiarity, validity, and reference ranges. However,  
290 BMI has limitations for use in young athletes. Although weight loss can improve OA symptoms, further  
291 research is needed to identify a means of assessing important OA-related nutritional factors. Assessment  
292 of physical activity using a validated accelerometer, to accurately capture activity through each domain  
293 and intensity, is a promising area that requires future study.

294

#### 295 **Biomechanical outcomes**

296 Biomechanical outcomes are measures of joint mechanics typically collected in a research setting, but  
297 sometimes taken in a primary care setting. Joint mechanics can be employed to assess OA severity, but  
298 also for understanding the causes of OA onset and progression. For example, altered joint mechanics  
299 following knee injury might contribute to the onset and development of post-traumatic OA<sup>39</sup>. Indirect  
300 evidence to support this concept comes from observations of altered joint movement, loading, and muscle  
301 activation patterns following injury<sup>102-107</sup>, with radiographic knee OA (KL $\geq$ 2)<sup>108-110</sup>, with aging<sup>111, 112</sup> and pre  
302 and post joint arthroplasty<sup>113-115</sup>. Abnormal joint alignment<sup>116, 117</sup>, alteration of the external knee adduction  
303 moment (KAM) and increased varus alignment are often regarded as indicators of altered joint mechanics  
304 associated with increased OA severity<sup>110</sup>. However, joint mechanics in OA might also change because of  
305 other factors including loss of dynamic joint stability<sup>118, 119</sup>, muscle atrophy<sup>120</sup>, neuromuscular inhibition<sup>121</sup>,  
306 muscle weakness,<sup>122-124</sup> and compensatory muscle activation mechanisms<sup>108, 109, 114</sup>. These changes might  
307 alter cartilage loading and contact mechanics. Indeed, some studies indicate changes in tibiofemoral  
308 cartilage contact locations<sup>39, 125</sup>, elongated path lengths<sup>126</sup>, force magnitudes<sup>103, 127, 128</sup>, and deformations<sup>125,</sup>

309 <sup>126</sup> are associated with OA onset and progression. In turn, OA progression might be caused by progressive  
310 degradation of cartilage through interactions of articular movement and cartilage loading abnormalities,  
311 chronic inflammation, resultant tissue remodelling, and other OA risk factors by increasing the  
312 susceptibility of cartilage and subchondral bone to damage and degradation at regions inadequately  
313 adapted to these altered loads<sup>125, 129-133</sup>. Over time, this process might result in altered cartilage thicknesses  
314 and clinically relevant cartilage thinning in different regions of the articular cartilage surfaces. To verify  
315 this mechanism, longitudinal data are needed of the joint mechanics, cartilage thickness, and cartilage  
316 structure and integrity in OA<sup>134, 135</sup>. Integration of this information with other risk factors for OA-related  
317 changes might inform the development of novel patient-specific, diagnostic or predictive models to aid in  
318 early patient screening, intervention efficacy monitoring, and the development of new therapeutics<sup>127, 128,</sup>  
319 <sup>130, 136, 137</sup>. Armed with these data and models, new wearable monitors might enable biomechanical  
320 outcomes assessment in the clinic and community<sup>131-133, 138, 139</sup>, and might provide the possibility of  
321 developing and monitoring personalized treatment plans.

322 Presently, the joint range of motion is a suggested measure that could be collected in a primary care setting  
323 to assess OA severity. The other biomechanical outcomes mentioned above (e.g., KAM, kinematics,  
324 electromyography, cartilage loading) although used to understand the mechanisms of OA progression  
325 and currently not feasibly collected in most clinical settings, are an important component for consideration  
326 in research settings to inform orthotics design, exercise interventions, bracing, and surgical interventions.  
327 In the future, validated wearable monitors might help assess biomechanical outcomes of early  
328 interventions in the clinic and community. Evidence suggests that outcome measures are not independent  
329 but rather variation in one outcome measure (for example, biomechanical outcomes) can influence the  
330 quantitative state of another measure (for example, biomarkers or imaging outcomes)<sup>140-144</sup>. Thus, future  
331 research should consider the interaction between different outcome measures to potentially increase the  
332 sensitivity of detecting early OA<sup>129, 141</sup>.

333

334 **Imaging outcomes**

335 Osteoarthritis is a complex syndrome that at the local level, is best characterised as a whole joint disease  
336 involving multiple tissue pathologies. In attempting to characterise and monitor the variety of OA  
337 structural components a number of different imaging modalities have been used-the most common  
338 amongst these being x-ray, ultrasound and MRI. This section will predominantly focus on plain  
339 radiography and MRI, as ultrasound has a number of limitations that have constrained its development  
340 and validity in this area including observer dependency and an inability to adequately image weight-  
341 bearing portions of the joint.

342 Radiographic features of OA are generally classified by the Kellgren and Lawrence (KL) grading system<sup>145</sup>  
343 and include joint space narrowing, osteophyte formation, sclerosis, and deformity of bony contours<sup>146</sup>.  
344 Minimum radiographic joint space width (JSW) is the gold standard recommended by the FDA for detecting  
345 structural changes in patients with knee OA in clinical trials. Standardized measures of radiographic  
346 positioning and fixed location JSW can reach the same degree of responsiveness as quantitative measures  
347 of cartilage thickness on MRI <sup>147</sup>. However, radiographic features such as loss of joint space, sclerosis, and  
348 deformity of bone are associated with late-stage OA and are preceded and detected with greater  
349 sensitivity by MRI.

350 Conventional MRI enables the evaluation of morphological changes related to early OA, including but not  
351 limited to cartilage damage, meniscal damage, synovitis, presence of BMLs, and ligamentous damage. In  
352 one study of patients with knee pain (n=255, age 40-79 years), BMLs were present in 11% of individuals  
353 without radiographic OA (KL = 0), 38% of individuals with pre-radiographic OA (KL = 1) and 71% of  
354 individuals with radiographic OA (KL >2)<sup>148, 149</sup>. Similarly, 42% of patients with a diagnosis of symptomatic  
355 OA without radiographic features (KL < 2) had BMLs and 57% had cartilage loss<sup>150</sup>. Although a paucity of  
356 data exists regarding the timeline of structural changes in the period between a joint injury sustained in

357 youth and the onset of clinical post-traumatic OA, advanced MRI techniques have been used to detect  
358 subtle cartilage damage at the time of ACL injury<sup>151</sup>. Furthermore, macroscopic cartilaginous changes, the  
359 presence of BMLs, and bone morphology changes might be detectable by conventional MRI techniques  
360 as early as two years post ACL reconstruction or other intra-articular knee injury (and potentially before  
361 the development of radiographic OA)<sup>6, 152-155</sup>.

362 In 2011, a definition of MRI-defined OA was proposed to facilitate earlier detection of OA (Box 2)<sup>156, 157</sup>. In  
363 one study of patients who had undergone anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) reconstruction, 19% and 17%  
364 of the participants met the MRI criteria for tibiofemoral and patellofemoral OA, respectively, at 1 year<sup>158</sup>.  
365 Importantly, some of the changes included in this criteria are undetectable by radiography (i.e. cartilage  
366 thickness, bone marrow lesions). Different methodologies can be used to measure structural changes in  
367 the knee by MRI including the use of semi-quantitative measures (such as the MRI Osteoarthritis Knee  
368 Score (MOAKS)), quantitative measures (including cartilage thickness, bone marrow lesion volume,  
369 effusion-synovitis volume and meniscal extrusion) and measures obtained using compositional imaging  
370 modalities of cartilage (including T2 mapping, T1ρ mapping, delayed gadolinium-enhanced MRI of cartilage  
371 (dGEMRIC), sodium MRI and glycosaminoglycan chemical exchange saturation transfer (gagCEST)) which  
372 measure cartilage composition and quality<sup>159</sup>. Semiquantitative MRI evaluation can be performed using  
373 several available scoring systems such as the MRI Osteoarthritis Knee Score (MOAKS) and the Anterior  
374 Cruciate Ligament Osteoarthritis Score (ACLOAS)<sup>148, 160</sup>. For synovitis assessment, contrast-enhanced MRI  
375 should be used and semi-quantitative scoring systems based on contrast-enhanced MRI are available to  
376 enable clear delineation of the synovium from effusion<sup>161</sup>. In population-based studies, a high proportion  
377 of radiographically normal knees have osteophytes and cartilage damage detectable by MRI illustrating  
378 the greater sensitivity of MRI as compared to radiography<sup>149</sup>. However, it also highlights the challenge of  
379 what is to be regarded as osteoarthritic disease and what is part of a normally ageing joint<sup>162</sup>. The link  
380 between anatomical evidence of OA and patients' symptoms and function is still rather weak<sup>163, 164</sup>.



381 Ultimately, the presence of these findings on MRI require validation by longitudinal follow-up studies to  
382 identify their association with subsequent illness related to OA (alteration of patient function and  
383 symptoms)<sup>165</sup> to avoid over-diagnosis because of incidental MRI findings<sup>148, 149, 166-168</sup>. Notably, the  
384 distinction between pathology and normal features of the ageing joint is unclear and further research to  
385 elucidate the importance of MRI findings in early knee OA is warranted.

386 Hence, the utility of plain radiography in early OA is limited as only relatively late OA changes are  
387 detectable. As technology improves, assessing changes in bone shape or trabecular bone texture of sub-  
388 chondral bone might be of use. MRI has superior sensitivity to change and validity in the context of early  
389 OA. Although not appropriate for all primary care settings because of the high cost and risk of over-  
390 diagnosis, MRI is a critical component of ongoing outcome validation research in early knee OA.

391

#### 392 **Biomarker outcomes**

393 Some laboratory OA biomarkers detectable in blood, urine or synovial fluid are associated with or  
394 predictive of incident radiographic knee OA. Biomarkers of joint tissue turnover can reflect disease-  
395 relevant biological activity that might not otherwise be apparent before structural changes are detectable  
396 by MRI or plain radiography. Ideally, biomarkers of early OA must clearly differentiate between normal  
397 (physiological) and pathological tissue turnover as well as between the early stages of the disease and  
398 more advanced joint destruction. The biomarkers must also be unaffected by other disorders and be easily  
399 measured in a clinical setting<sup>169</sup>. Biomarkers of early OA might also be used to identify pre-radiographic  
400 changes at the molecular level and facilitate OA drug discovery, and potentially enable a more rational and  
401 personalized approach to healthcare OA management by prompting earlier and more targeted treatment  
402 <sup>170</sup>.

403 Studies of incident OA have identified some of the earliest molecular abnormalities associated with OA  
404 and therefore provide biomarker candidates for early OA identification. 10 years prior to radiographic

405 hand or knee OA, four serum proteins (matrix metalloproteinase-7, IL-15, plasminogen activator  
406 inhibitor-1 and soluble vascular adhesion protein-1) were altered in a cohort of patients with OA  
407 compared with healthy individuals<sup>171</sup>. Similarly, serum COMP (sCOMP) and hyaluronan concentrations  
408 could predict<sup>172</sup> incident knee joint space narrowing and osteophyte (sCOMP) formation 7 years later in  
409 another patient cohort. In another study, incident radiographic knee OA over ten years was positively  
410 predicted by serum COMP concentration (based on KL scores) at baseline but negatively predicted by  
411 serum aggrecan concentration<sup>173</sup>. Furthermore, mean baseline serum osteocalcin concentrations levels  
412 are associated with 3-year incident radiographic hand OA (KL >2) but not knee OA in pre-menopausal  
413 and peri-menopausal women<sup>174</sup>. Bioactive lipids are also potential biomarkers of pain and inflammation  
414 <sup>175</sup> and metabolomics has been used to identify metabolic profiles that can differentiate between  
415 synovium samples from patients with OA and healthy individuals<sup>176</sup>.

416 In 2006, the NIH-funded OA Biomarkers Network and the OARSI Clinical Trials Biomarkers Working group  
417 proposed a new classification system for OA biomarkers termed BIPEDS<sup>177, 178</sup>. The purpose of this  
418 classification was to clarify the intended primary use of the biomarker to reflect Burden of OA disease,  
419 Investigative, Prognostic for OA development, Efficacy of OA intervention, Diagnostic for OA and Safety of  
420 intervention biomarkers) classification system for OA biomarkers<sup>172,173</sup>. However, a systematic review  
421 performed in 2010 concluded that individual biochemical markers and categories of biochemical markers,  
422 including their nature, origin and metabolism, need further investigation and validation<sup>179</sup>. In 2016, the  
423 FDA-NIH Biomarker Working Group proposed the development of the BEST (Biomarkers, Endpoints, and  
424 other Tools) resource<sup>180</sup>. The BEST resource is a glossary that aims to distinguish between biomarkers and  
425 clinical assessments and to describe the distinct functions of biomarkers in biomedical research, clinical  
426 practice, and medical product development. BEST can be used to test, validate, and commercialize a  
427 biomarker to be used in clinical drug testing trials, and might also be used for improving biomarker  
428 development for early OA.

429 The profiling of biological fluids (for example, serum and synovial fluid) and joint tissues can provide a  
430 global view of the physiologic state of an OA joint. Refinements in omics approaches and advances in  
431 analytical techniques will enable improved profiling of different stages of disease. To be clinically useful  
432 these biomarkers need to be properly qualified (that is, a process needs to link a biomarker with other  
433 biological, biomechanical and clinical outcomes) for early OA and they must adhere to the BEST guidelines  
434 to be effectively used in a clinical setting, rather than in an exploratory and research setting.

435 Soluble biomarkers require further study, validation, and qualification as susceptibility or risk outcomes  
436 for the development of early OA before being adopted for widespread use in the clinical care setting. Their  
437 contextualized evaluation in all OA research studies is encouraged.

438

#### 439 **Conclusions**

440 Various outcome domains exist that could be assessed for patients with early knee OA in research and/or  
441 clinical settings, including patient-reported outcomes, clinical features, measures of physical function,  
442 adiposity, physical activity or nutrition and biomechanical, imaging, or biochemical markers. Promising  
443 patient reported outcomes for this purpose include the KOOS and the ICOAP. Measures of physical  
444 outcomes (for example, single leg hop, quadriceps strength) and fat mass index (DXA) are also valid and  
445 reliable. With increasing popularity worldwide, a validated wearable physical activity monitor for  
446 quantifying levels of physical activity and a 3-day weighed food record for nutritional intake (for example,  
447 calories) has potential. MRI-defined OA and biomarkers, although promising, require specific healthcare  
448 and research settings where these outcomes are possible to collect. Additional considerations of patient-  
449 preferences and psychosocial outcomes are also important in future research examining early knee OA  
450 outcome measures<sup>181</sup>. In this regard, further patient-engaged research is recommended.

451 Importantly, multiple factors must be considered to facilitate risk assessment and the development of  
452 predictive models for early knee OA. Furthermore, definitions are needed for the potential outcomes,

453 exposures, confounding and effect-modifying variables, duration of the clinically relevant prediction  
454 period and the setting in which the risk prediction tool will be used. As such, further research validating  
455 outcomes in individuals 'at risk' of early OA progression (for example, individuals with an intra-articular  
456 knee injury and/or who are obese) and 'early-OA' populations is required.

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#### 942 **Acknowledgements**

943 The authors acknowledge the financial support of Alberta Team OA (Alberta Innovates Health Solutions  
944 Collaborative Research and Innovation Opportunity Team) and Arthritis Research UK who funded an initial  
945 meeting at Osteoarthritis Research Society International to discuss outcomes in early OA. The support of  
946 Osteoarthritis Research Society International is acknowledged for meeting room facilities. The authors  
947 would like to thank Tanya Childs for the administrative support in completing this manuscript.

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#### 949 **Author contributions**

950 “CAE, JLW, NKA, AMa, LSL, EMR, KLB, CMT, RAR, DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM,  
951 MAR, AMo, AG, DJH, NKA researched data for the article. CAE, JLW, NKA, AMa, LSL, EMR, KLB, CMT, RAR,  
952 DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM, MAR, AMo, AG, DJH, NKA provided substantial  
953 contributions to discussion of content. CAE, JLW, NKA, AMa, LSL, and FPL wrote the article and CAE, JLW,  
954 NKA, AMa, LSL, EMR, KLB, CMT, RAR, DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM, MAR, AMo,  
955 AG, DJH, NKA reviewed and/or edited the manuscript before submission.”

#### 956 **Competing Interests**

957 CAE, JLW, AMa, NKA, KLB, CMT, RAR, DT, JLR, GK, DGL, TA, ME, VBK, EL, SBZ, JR, GP, FPL, LSM, MAR, AMo,

958 AG, and DJH declare that they have no competing interests. E.M.R. and L.S.L declare that they contributed to  
959 the development of the Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS). L.S.L. also declares that he  
960 contributed to the development of the ICOAP and the Anterior Cruciate Ligament Osteoarthritis Score (ACLOAS).

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962 Related links

963 KOOS scoring instructions: <http://www.koos.nu/>

964 Single Leg Hop for distance: <https://www.sralab.org/rehabilitation-measures/single-limb-hop-tests>

965 30-second Chair Sit-to-Stand Test: <https://vimeo.com/74649743>

966 6-minute walk test: <https://vimeo.com/74649737>

**Box 1. Proposed outcomes for the assessment of early pre-radiographic OA**

Below we provide suggestions for outcomes measures that could be used to assess individuals with early pre-radiographic OA in clinical practice and in research settings. Further research is needed, including evaluation of validity of early-OA specific outcomes and change in outcomes with progression of OA as many of these measures have been evaluated primarily in established OA.

**In clinical practice and research settings:**

Patient-reported outcomes

The Knee Injury and Osteoarthritis Outcome Score (KOOS) can be used to measure pain during activity, other symptoms (e.g., stiffness, grinding, catching, swelling, knee flexion and extension) , function in daily life and during sport and recreational activities, and quality of life across different age and treatment groups. The intermittent and constant assessment of pain score (ICOAP) can evaluate constant and intermittent pain.

Clinical examination

A clinical assessment including joint line tenderness should be performed on individuals with newly-onset symptoms of knee pain, stiffness, crepitus, or a feeling of ‘giving way’.

Functional outcomes

Three measures seem promising for use in clinical settings on the basis of their reproducibility, patient acceptability and the equipment and expertise required: Single leg hop test, 30 second chair sit-to-stand and quadriceps strength measure. Multiple additional functional measures have been validated for use in research settings.

Lifestyle-related outcomes

Adiposity can be assessed by body fat percentage or fat mass index (fat mass/height<sup>2</sup>) using dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry or bioelectrical impedance analysis if available. BMI is more feasible in clinical settings, although has limitations for use in athletes. Levels of physical activity can be assessed using a validated physical activity monitor or a validated questionnaire if objective methods are not available. Nutrition outcomes are not currently suggested for use in routine clinical care, however the 3-day dietary record provides reliable estimates of nutrient intake.

**In research settings only:**

Biomechanical outcomes

Measures of biomechanical outcomes require further research and are not currently suggested for use in routine clinical care. However, such outcomes are ideal for informing the underlying mechanisms of OA progression and informing treatment interventions in research setting.

Imaging outcomes

The utility of plain radiography in early OA is limited. Although MRI has superior sensitivity to change and validity in the context of early OA, and is hence ideal in research settings, MRI is not thought appropriate for the routine clinical care setting because of the high cost and potential risk of over-diagnosis.

Biomarkers

No biomarkers are currently of use in routine clinical care; however, further validation of proteomic, lipidomic and metabolomic tools in research settings could lead to informative cartilage and synovial fluid profiles and provide important insights into OA progression.

Commented [CE1]: Thought of others on this addition?

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**Table 1.** Important physical function outcomes

Outcome measure	Test measure	Equipment Required	Reliability			Error	Validity		Responsive /Interpretability	Appropriate risk group (age)	References
			Intra	Inter	Re-test		Struct-ural	Ho testing			
Single leg hop for distance	Length (cm)	Measuring tape	+	-	-	-	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	43, 44, 47-50
Cross hop for distance	Length (cm)	Measuring tape	+	-	-	-	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	40,44-4
6 meter timed hop test	Time (sec)	Measuring tape	+	-	-	-	-	+	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	43, 47-50
Star excursion balance test	Length (% leg length)	Measuring mat, measuring tape and skilled rater (leg length)	+	+	+	+	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	44, 51-55
30-second chair sit-to-stand test	Count	Chair and timer	+	+	-	-	-	-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	53-55
6 minute walk test	Length (m)	Flat 20m walking area, timer and chair	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	Obese (all ages)	41, 42
Vertical drop jump	Risk rating	31cm high box	+	+	-	-	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	44, 59
Single leg squat	Risk rating	None	+	+	-	-	+/-	+/-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	44, 60-62
Unipedal dynamic balance	Time (sec)	Balance pad and timer	-	+	+	-	+	+	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	41,61
20 meter shuttle run	Stage	Coloured tape and instructions.	-	-	+	+	-/+	+	-	Post-trauma (≤45 years)	41,61
Quadriceps strength	Force (Nm/Kg)	Hand-held or isokinetic dynamometer and skilled rater	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	44, 47, 48, 51, 65
Hamstring strength	Force (Nm/Kg)	Hand-held or isokinetic dynamometer and skilled rater	+	+	+	+	+/-	+/-	+/-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	41,43

Hip adductor or hip abductor strength	Force (Nm/Kg)	Hand-held or isokinetic dynamometer and skilled rater	+	+	+	+	-	+/-	-	Post-trauma or obese (all ages)	41,43	977
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983 + = supporting evidence, - = no supporting evidence, +/- = conflicting evidence,

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**Box 2** MRI-defined osteoarthritis<sup>92</sup>

Tibio-femoral MRI-defined osteoarthritis (OA) is based on identifying the following MRI features in the medial or lateral tibio-femoral compartment:

- Definite osteophyte AND full thickness cartilage loss

Or

- Definite osteophyte OR full thickness cartilage loss AND at least two of the following:
  - Sub-chondral bone marrow lesion not associated with meniscal or ligamentous attachment.
  - Meniscal subluxation (for example, meniscal extrusion), maceration or degeneration (including horizontal tear).
  - Partial thickness cartilage loss where full-thickness loss was not present.
  - Bone attrition in one of the tibiofemoral (medial or lateral) or patellofemoral joint compartments respectively.

Mixed Tibio-femoral MRI-defined OA is based on meeting some of the above features in one compartment and others in a second compartment.

Patellofemoral MRI-defined OA is based on identifying a definite osteophyte and partial or full-thickness cartilage loss in the patellofemoral compartment

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