

K-Taping: The Sticky Truth

If you have been present at any sporting event in the last few years, you will almost certainly have seen lots of athletes running about with lots of brightly coloured tape seemingly holding them together. Tape has long since been the ally of the physiotherapist and, I dare say, it will continue to do so. Kinesiology tape is the newest fad, promoting such bold claims as being able to reduce swelling and reducing pain. It certainly does have a certain 80's pop feel to it, nice bright pinks, blues and even union jack patterns to name a few, but does it really do what it says on the tin?



Well, as with anything in the 21st century, there is always a call for science to prove its claims. And unfortunately it would seem there is a bit of a scarcity in not just research, but good quality research. I had a quick examine of a few published articles to see what the research was saying.

Lets begin by considering in a little more detail the proposed benefits of K-taping. As previously mentioned it claims to be able to reduce inflammation by increasing microcirculation under the area where it lays. It has been suggested that it reduces pain by increasing afferent nerve stimulation – these are the nerves sending information about sensations from your limbs to your brain, akin to rubbing your elbow if you bash it to make it feel better. It is thought that muscles may be inhibited by the tape when applied in certain ways whilst having the potential to increase muscle activity when applied in others. It certainly sounds very impressive, you can't deny that!

But can the studies support these claims? One study applied K-tape to 36 athletes between 36-48 hours post suffering an ankle sprain to assess the impact of K-tape to

help reduce swelling. They underwent assessment to measure the amount of swelling of the foot prior to tape application, then they were reassessed at 3 days and 15 days after injury. The study concluded that: there were no positive effects of K-tape on reducing inflammation. The study did comment on an older piece of research where some encouraging findings were seen when using K-tape to reduce swelling in patients with chronic swelling as the result of circulatory issues. The proposed reason for the different findings being that in an acute ankle sprain there is an active inflammatory process.

Another study from 2015 showed that across 33 adult subjects, K-tape application failed to either inhibit or facilitate grip strength. Whilst a study from 2014 on 40 subjects with knee osteoarthritis showed that K-tape did help to improve the amount of force generated at the knee. Lastly a case study from 2016 of one female patient who had K-tape applied as part of her treatment concluded that K-tape helped to reduce pain whilst improving both flexibility and strength... The romantic in me would love to accept that, but truthfully, there were other interventions applied and so it would seem to this cynical old mind that such a conclusion is bold to say the least.

What to make of all this then? Well, the research is far from a glowing report, rather an A for effort but C- substance with a side note; tends to distract others in class. However! As I mentioned there have been other studies with encouraging results.



And rather than purely condemning K-tape as a failure because it hasn't proved its claims, I believe it does have a use in its own way. I certainly do not believe all of its claims, nor do I use it clinically based upon these claims. But anecdotally I have found it to be useful for certain pathologies and injuries at certain times within the healing

process with certain patients.

If you want a cut and dry answer to the question; does tape work? I'm afraid you will not find it here. Maybe if we can build a collection of strong research we will be able to say with more certainty one way or the other. Using clinical judgement and experience to use tape as an adjunct, in my opinion, is perfectly reasonable, but I would urge caution on swallowing the claims that it can do everything it says on the tin. For now we rest knowing that K-tape may help some of the time for somethings.... for some reason.

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