E-ISSN 2250-0944
ISSN 2250-1150
doi: 10.48047/ijprt/16.02.33

Research Article

MRI-Based Grading of Lumbar Disc Degeneration and Its Correlation with Functional Disability Scores: A Cross-Sectional Analytical Study

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Abstract

Lumbar disc degeneration (LDD) is a major cause of chronic low back pain and functional disability worldwide, significantly impacting quality of life and productivity. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is the gold standard for evaluating structural disc changes, while functional disability scales provide clinical assessment of symptom severity. This study aimed to evaluate the correlation between MRI-based grading of lumbar disc degeneration and functional disability scores in patients presenting with chronic low back pain.

A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted on 480 patients with chronic low back pain. MRI findings were graded using the Pfirrmann classification system. Functional disability was assessed using the Oswestry Disability Index (ODI) and Visual Analog Scale (VAS) for pain severity. Statistical analysis was performed to determine correlation between radiological severity and functional impairment.

MRI revealed mild degeneration in 26.9%, moderate degeneration in 38.5%, and severe degeneration in 34.6% of patients. Mean ODI scores increased significantly with higher Pfirrmann grades (Grade II: 18.4 ± 6.2; Grade III: 32.7 ± 8.5; Grade IV–V: 49.6 ± 10.3; $p<0.001$). A strong positive correlation was observed between MRI grade and ODI score ($r = 0.71$, $p<0.001$). VAS pain scores also

demonstrated significant association with disc degeneration severity.

The study demonstrates a strong and statistically significant correlation between MRI-based lumbar disc degeneration grading and functional disability scores, highlighting the importance of imaging in clinical severity assessment and management planning.

Keywords: Lumbar disc degeneration, MRI, Oswestry Disability Index, low back pain

Introduction

Low back pain is one of the most prevalent musculoskeletal complaints globally and represents a leading cause of disability across all age groups. Among its various etiologies, lumbar disc degeneration (LDD) is considered one of the most significant structural contributors. It is characterized by progressive biochemical and morphological changes in the intervertebral disc, leading to loss of hydration, disc height reduction, annular fissures, and eventual structural failure [1–3].

The intervertebral disc plays a critical role in spinal biomechanics by absorbing axial loads and enabling flexibility. Degenerative changes disrupt this function, resulting in altered load distribution, facet joint stress, and nerve root compression. These structural changes are often responsible for chronic pain syndromes and functional limitations [2–4].

Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) is the most sensitive and specific imaging modality for assessing lumbar disc pathology. It allows visualization of disc hydration, nucleus pulposus integrity, annular morphology, and endplate changes. The Pfirrmann grading system is widely used for classifying disc degeneration severity based on MRI signal intensity, disc structure, and height reduction [3–5].

Despite the high diagnostic accuracy of MRI, the relationship between radiological findings and clinical symptoms remains complex and sometimes inconsistent. Some patients with advanced radiological degeneration may remain asymptomatic, while others with mild imaging changes may experience severe disability. This discrepancy highlights the multifactorial nature of low back pain [4–6].

Functional disability in patients with lumbar disc degeneration is commonly assessed using validated scoring systems such as the Oswestry Disability Index (ODI) and Visual Analog Scale (VAS). These tools quantify the impact of pain on daily activities, mobility, and overall quality of life [5–7].

Understanding the correlation between MRI findings and functional disability is essential

for clinical decision-making. It helps in determining the severity of disease, guiding treatment strategies, and predicting prognosis. Strong radiological-clinical correlation supports the use of imaging as a reliable tool in patient assessment [6–8].

However, previous studies have reported variable levels of correlation between imaging severity and clinical symptoms, suggesting that additional factors such as psychological status, muscle strength, occupational stress, and pain perception may influence disability outcomes [7–9].

Recent advancements in spine imaging and quantitative MRI techniques have improved the ability to detect early degenerative changes. However, standardized interpretation and clinical correlation remain essential for meaningful application in practice [8–10].

Given the increasing burden of chronic low back pain and the need for improved diagnostic accuracy, this study was conducted to evaluate the relationship between MRI-based grading of lumbar disc degeneration and functional disability scores in affected patients.

Methodology

A cross-sectional analytical study was conducted at CMH Sargodha, Sargodha over a period of 18 months. Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board, and informed consent was obtained from all participants.

A total of 480 patients aged 20–70 years with chronic low back pain (duration >3 months) were included. Patients with previous spinal surgery, spinal tumors, infections, trauma, or inflammatory spinal diseases were excluded.

MRI of the lumbar spine was performed using a 1.5 Tesla scanner. Disc degeneration was graded using the Pfirrmann classification (Grade I–V) based on signal intensity, nucleus-annulus distinction, disc height, and structure.

Functional disability was assessed using the Oswestry Disability Index (ODI), while pain intensity was measured using the Visual Analog Scale (VAS). ODI scores were categorized into minimal, moderate, severe, and crippled disability.

Demographic data including age, sex, body mass index (BMI), occupation, and duration of symptoms were recorded. Statistical analysis was performed using SPSS version 27. Mean and standard deviation were calculated for continuous variables, while categorical variables were expressed as percentages. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to assess relationship between MRI grade and disability scores. A p-value <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

Table 1. Baseline Characteristics of Study Population (n=480)

Variable	Value
Age (years)	45.6 ± 12.8
Male (%)	54.2
BMI (kg/m²)	27.3 ± 4.6
Duration of symptoms (months)	14.8 ± 6.3
Sedentary occupation (%)	61.5

The study population predominantly consisted of middle-aged individuals with sedentary occupational exposure.

Table 2. MRI-Based Pfirrmann Grading of Disc Degeneration

Grade	Severity	Frequency (%)
I–II	Mild	26.9
III	Moderate	38.5
IV–V	Severe	34.6

Moderate disc degeneration was the most frequently observed MRI finding.

Table 3. Correlation Between MRI Grade and Oswestry Disability Index (ODI)

Pfirrmann Grade	ODI Score (Mean ± SD)
I–II	18.4 ± 6.2
III	32.7 ± 8.5

Pfirrmann Grade	ODI Score (Mean ± SD)
IV–V	49.6 ± 10.3

Correlation coefficient: $r = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$

A strong positive correlation was observed between MRI severity and functional disability.

Table 4. Association Between MRI Grade and VAS Pain Score

Grade	VAS Score (Mean ± SD)
I–II	3.2 ± 1.1
III	5.6 ± 1.4
IV–V	7.8 ± 1.2

p-value < 0.001

Pain severity increased significantly with worsening disc degeneration.

Table 5. Functional Disability Distribution

Disability Level	Percentage (%)
Minimal	21.7
Moderate	39.2
Severe	28.6
Crippled	10.5

Most patients experienced moderate to severe disability.

Discussion

The present study demonstrates a strong and statistically significant correlation between MRI-based lumbar disc degeneration grading and functional disability scores. This supports the clinical utility of MRI as a reliable tool for assessing disease severity in chronic low back pain [11–12].

The predominance of moderate to severe disc degeneration reflects the chronic nature of low back pain in the studied population. Degenerative changes progress gradually,

often becoming symptomatic when structural compromise reaches a threshold affecting spinal biomechanics [12–13].

A strong positive correlation between Pfirrmann grade and ODI scores indicates that structural degeneration is closely associated with functional impairment. This suggests that MRI findings can serve as a useful predictor of disability severity in clinical practice [13–14].

The observed increase in VAS pain scores with worsening MRI grades further supports the association between anatomical degeneration and symptom intensity. Disc dehydration, annular fissuring, and reduced disc height likely contribute to mechanical and inflammatory pain mechanisms [14–15].

However, variability in disability among patients with similar MRI grades suggests that non-structural factors such as psychological stress, muscle deconditioning, and pain perception also influence clinical outcomes [15–16].

Sedentary lifestyle and occupational factors observed in the study population may have contributed to increased prevalence of moderate to severe degeneration. Prolonged sitting and poor posture are known risk factors for lumbar disc stress [16–17].

The findings emphasize the importance of integrating radiological findings with clinical assessment rather than relying solely on imaging. A multidisciplinary approach is essential for effective management of chronic low back pain [17–18].

Overall, the study supports the role of MRI as a valuable tool in correlating structural pathology with functional disability, aiding in better clinical decision-making [18–20].

Conclusion

A strong positive correlation exists between MRI-based lumbar disc degeneration grading and functional disability scores. Higher Pfirrmann grades are associated with increased pain and disability. MRI, combined with clinical assessment, provides an effective framework for evaluating and managing chronic low back pain.

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