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Cervical Flexion and Extension Includes Anti-directional Cervical Joint Motion in Healthy Adults

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ABSTRACT

Background context: Anti-directional cervical joint motion has previously been demonstrated. However, quantitative studies of anti-directional and pro-directional cervical flexion and extension motions have not been published.

Purpose: Quantitative assessment of directional and anti-directional cervical joint motion in healthy subjects.

Study design: Observational study.

Patients sample: Eighteen healthy subjects.

Outcome measures: Anti-directional and pro-directional cervical flexion and extension motion from each cervical joint in degrees.

Methods: Fluoroscopy videos of cervical flexion and extension motions (from neutral to end-range) were acquired from 18 healthy subjects. The videos were divided into 10% epochs of C0/C7 range of motion (ROM). The pro-directional and anti-directional motions in each 10% epoch were extracted, and the ratios of anti-directional motions with respect to the pro-directional motions (0% = no anti-directional movement) were calculated for joints and 10% epochs. This study was funded by University \$ 2,000.

Results: The flexion and extension ROM for C0/C7 were $51.9\pm 9.3^\circ$ and $57.2\pm 12.2^\circ$. The anti-directional motions of flexion and extension ROM constituted $42.8\pm 9.7\%$ and $41.2\pm 8.2\%$ of the respective pro-directional movements. For flexion, the first three joints (C0/C1, C1/C2, C2/C3) demonstrated larger ratios compared to the last three joints (C4/C5, C5/C6, C6/C7) ($P<0.03$). For extension, C1/C2 and C2/C3 ratios were larger compared to C0/C1, C4/C5, and

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C5/C6 ($P < 0.03$). Comparisons between flexion and extension motions showed larger C0/C1 ratio but smaller C5/C6 and C6/C7 ratios in extension ($P < 0.05$).

Conclusions: This is the first report of quantified anti-directional cervical flexion and extension motion. The anti-directional motion is approximately 40% of the pro-directional motion. The results document that large proportions of anti-directional cervical flexion and extension motions were normal.

Key words. Spine, Anti-directional motion, Range of Motion, Cervical Vertebrae, Neck, Fluoroscopy

INTRODUCTION

Cervical flexion and extension range of motion (ROM) are frequently assessed in healthy subjects [1], whiplash patients [2], and patients after disc arthroplasty and fusion [3] as a measure of cervical function. Reduced and absent cervical joint motion are diagnostic signs in clinical and surgical assessment of the spine [4–6]. Cervical joint motion is an alternative measure, which have been demonstrated more precise and clinical relevant for cervical biomechanics and postoperative assessments compared to cervical ROM [5–8].

Flexion and extension joint motions are typically assumed linear and continuous [1,9]. However, joint motions opposite to the intended motion direction have pervious been reported in healthy subjects [10–12]. Healthy anti-directional cervical joint motions have never been quantified. Anti-directional joint motion was defined as motion opposite to the intended motion direction (pro-directional motion). Cervical spine motion is often modelled as a spring-like spine structure with linear joint motions where the deep cervical muscles stabilize the spring-like spine, and the superficial muscles function as the prime movers [13,14]. Anatomically, the deep muscles provide precise motor control on individual cervical joint movements, in contrast to the superficial muscles acting across multiple joints [15–17]. The superficial muscles cannot flex or extend an individual joint without simultaneous activation of the deep muscles. Thus, a motion strategy including joint specific anti-directional motions requires more activity of the deep cervical muscles compared to a motion strategy of a spring-like structure [13,14].

Recent studies do not support the linear and continuous pattern of joint motion during cervical flexion and extension [11]. Craine *et al.* demonstrated that the lower cervical joints may flex while the upper spine simultaneously extends, and vice-versa [12]. Brief anti-

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directional motions of C6/C7 during flexion were accompanied by anti-directional upper cervical motions (C0-C2) [18]. Anti-directional motion of atlas (C1) has been attributed to the biconvex anatomy of the atlanto-axial articulation [19]. Anti-directional motions were also demonstrated for C0/C1 and C7/T1 during cervical flexion and extension [10].

Cervical manipulation is a frequent and evident bases treatment of neck pain [20–23]. Hypo-mobility of cervical joints is the key element in motion assessments prior to cervical manipulations [23] and hypo-mobility is also important in pre- and post-surgical assessments [3]. Evidence for large amounts of healthy anti-directional motion questions the clinical assumption that unidirectional hypo-mobility is a potential clinical problem.

Video-fluoroscopy has previously been reported reliable for in vivo investigation of spine kinematics [4,6,24]. Thus, the aim of this study was to quantify anti-directional cervical joint motion during neck flexion and extension by video-fluoroscopy in healthy subjects.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Subjects

The study included eighteen participants (6 females) (Table 1). Subjects were excluded in case of neck pain within the last 3 months, any neck disorders, cervical trauma, possible pregnancy, rheumatoid arthritis or other inflammatory disorders. The participants were between the age of 20 to 80 years old, and subjects were recruited from campus and through public media. Subjects were paid approximate \$ 22 per hour for their participation. All subjects received oral information about the experiment and signed a written informed consent. The study was conducted according to the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the local research ethics committee (N20140004).

Experimental procedures

Participants performed flexion and extension motions from neutral to end-range when sitting in a chair with knees, hips and ankles at 90°. Shoulders, elbows and waist were fixed with straps. For better visual tracking of the occiput subjects were asked to wear custom built glasses with external markers (metal balls attached to steel wires). The motions of flexion and extension were free and unrestricted. Subjects were instructed to visually follow a line on the floor, wall, ceiling, and a cross at eye height (natural position). Compliance to flexion or extension motion speed of 12 seconds was practiced before recording. Steady neutral and end-range positions were recorded for 2 s. After the end-range recording subjects returned to the neutral position at their own pace. Two flexion motions (flexion 1 & 2) followed by two extension motions (extension 1 & 2) were recorded and analyzed in this study (Supplementary 1).

Fluoroscopic recordings

Fluoroscopy videos of the cervical spine were recorded from the left side with 25 frames per second, with the source-to-subject (C7) distance of 76 cm (Philips BV Libra, 2006, Netherland), with 45 KV, 208 mA, 6.0 ms X-ray pulses and the videos were digitalized (Honestech VHS to DVD 3.0 SE). The average radiation exposure was estimated to be 0.48 mSv (PCXMC software, STUK, Helsinki, Finland).

*Healthy cervical flexion and extension includes anti-directional motion**Image analysis*

Videos were divided into 10% epochs with respect to the C0/C7 ROM from neutral to end-range positions. Two images on either end of the exact 10% C0/C7 epoch were selected for linear interpolation. Neutral position, end-range position, and nine interpolated images yielded cervical flexion or extension joint motion for the joints C0/C1 to C6/C7.

Images were manually marked on a high-resolution screen with 22 osseous points for C1 to C7 and 4 external points for C0 (Supplementary 2). Occiput (C0) was marked with 2 anterior and 2 posterior external markers (steel balls). The centers of anterior and posterior medullary cavities of atlas (C1) were marked. The inferior plate of axis (C2) was marked with two points at the endplate. Likewise, there were two points at the superior endplate of C7. The superior and inferior endplates of third to the sixth vertebra (C3-C6) were marked with four points [1,25]. Joint motion was analyzed in a MATLAB-based program. The program calculated a representative mid-plane of C0 to C7 and calculated the joint motion in degrees between two adjacent midplanes [1,25]. The manual marking of vertebrae and the change in joint motion were previously published as supplementary material [25]. Positive numbers show the joint opens anteriorly, and negative numbers that the joint opens posteriorly and zero for no change in joint opening. Investigator XW marked five images three times to test intra-rater reliability (upright, mid-range flexion and extension, end-range flexions and extension).

*Healthy cervical flexion and extension includes anti-directional motion**Motion analysis*

Anti-directional joint motion was defined as opposite motion to the intended motion direction (pro-directional). Joint motion in each of the ten epochs was calculated as the difference in degrees between two adjacent 10% interpolated images.

Two flexions and two extensions yielded ten joint motion angles for each joint from C0/C1 to C6/C7 and seventy joint motion angles for each flexion or extension. The two repeated flexions and extensions were averaged into 70 joint motion angles before calculations of anti- and pro-directional motions. Cervical actual range of C0/C7 motion was the sum of the 70 joint motion angles. Cervical anti-directional C0/C7 motion was the sum of negative numbers among the 70 joint motion angles. Cervical pro-directional C0/C7 motion was the sum of positive numbers among the 70 joint motion angles. Likewise, pro-directional or anti-directional joint motion angles within a particular joint across all epochs or within an epoch across all joints were extracted. The ratio between anti-directional and pro-directional motions was extracted (0% mean no anti-directional movement).

Statistical analysis

Normal distribution was tested with Shapiro Wilk test and a Q-Q plot. Ratios between anti-directional and pro-directional joint motions were compared separately for flexion and extension with one-way ANOVA. Ratios of 10% epochs were compared separately for flexion and extension with one-way repeated measured ANOVA. Comparisons of ratios between joints and movement type were performed by mixed-model ANOVA with joint (C0/C1 to C6/C7) as between-subject factor and movement (flexion, extension) as within-

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subject factor. Comparisons of the ratio between 10% epochs were tested with two-way repeated measured ANOVA with epoch (from 10% to 100%) and movement (flexion, extension) as within-subject factors. The assumption of sphericity was tested with Mauchly's test, if sphericity was not found a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied [26,27]. The measurement errors assessed in five subjects were presented as mean (SD) and intra-class correlation coefficient (ICC 3,1). Significant ANOVA factors or interactions were tested with Tukey's post-hoc test. Significance was set at $P < 0.05$. Statistical analysis was performed in SPSS (version 22, IBM).

This study was supported by University with \$ 2,000.

RESULTS

The analysis included two times seventy 10% epochs from repeated flexion and extension recordings from 18 subjects with a total of 5040 10% joint epochs. Low image quality of C5/C6 and C6/C7 excluded two subjects from the analysis.

The intra-rater measurement errors and ICC of the five images were for the neutral position $0.14 \pm 0.49^\circ$ and 0.998, for the mid-range epoch in flexion $0.42 \pm 1.35^\circ$ and 0.973, for the mid-range epoch in extension $0.13 \pm 1.19^\circ$ and 0.989, for end-range flexion $0.01 \pm 0.87^\circ$ and 0.996, and for end-range extension $0.00 \pm 0.90^\circ$ and 0.990, respectively. The measurement errors were normal distributed.

Cervical motion pattern

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The cervical motion patterns were diverse and illustrated the scattered anti-directional motion within the pro-directional motion. A representative motion pattern is illustrated in Fig. 1 & 2 where the maximal C2/C3 flexion ROM was reached in the 6th epoch (Fig. 1) and C0/C1 moves anti-directional in flexion during extension with maximum anti-directional ROM in the 8th epoch (Fig 2).

Cervical flexion

The average cervical C0/C7 flexion ROM was $51.9 \pm 9.3^\circ$. The total C0/C7 anti-directional flexion was $39.9 \pm 14.3^\circ$, and the total C0/C7 pro-directional flexion was $91.9 \pm 16.3^\circ$. The anti-directional movements constituted $42.8 \pm 9.7\%$ of the pro-directional movements. Thus, the flexion motion consists of approximately 76.9% anti-directional motion of resultant motion.

The upper cervical joints (C0/C1, C1/C2, C2/C3) showed higher ratios of anti-directional motions compared with lower cervical joints (C4/C5, C5/C6, and C6/C7) (ANOVA: $F [6, 119] = 14.02$; $P < 0.001$). Post-hoc analysis showed that the ratio was larger for C0/C1 compared with C3/C4, C4/C5, C5/C6, and C6/C7 (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.005$), and for C1/C2 compared with C4/C5, C5/C6, and C6/C7 (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.02$), C2/C3 compared with C4/C5, C5/C6, and C6/C7 (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.001$), respectively.

The ratios of anti-directional motion were not different between 10% epochs except for the 10th epoch which showed larger anti-directional motion (Mauchly's test $X^2(44) = 48.29$, $P = 0.35$. RM-ANOVA: $F [9, 153] = 13.3$; $P < 0.002$) and post-hoc analysis revealed that the ratio was larger for the 10th epoch compared to 2nd to 9th epochs (Fig. 4; Tukey: $P < 0.05$).

*Healthy cervical flexion and extension includes anti-directional motion**Cervical extension*

The cervical C0/C7 extension ROM was average $57.3 \pm 12.1^\circ$, with an average of $40.2 \pm 10.8^\circ$ anti-directional motion and $91.9 \pm 16.3^\circ$ pro-directional motion. The ratio between anti- and pro-directional motions was $41.2 \pm 8.2\%$. Thus, the ratio between anti-directional motion and resultant motion was about 71.9%.

The joints C1/C2 and C2/C3 showed more anti-directional motions the ratios between anti- and pro-directional motions (ANOVA: $F [6, 119] = 10.09$; $P < 0.001$). Post-hoc analysis indicated the ratio was larger for C1/C2 compared with C0/C1, C3/C4, C4/C5, and C5/C6 (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.001$) and also larger for C2/C3 compared with C0/C1, C3/C4, C4/C5 and C5/C6 (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.03$).

The first and last 10% epoch showed more anti-directional motions (Mauchly's test $X^2(44) = 44.66$, $P = 0.50$. RM-ANOVA: $F [9, 153] = 4.30$; $P < 0.001$). Post-hoc analysis showed larger ratio of anti-directional motion for the 1st epoch compared with the 2nd, 3rd and 4th epochs (Fig. 4; Tukey: $P < 0.04$) and larger ratios for the 10th epoch compared with the 2nd, 3rd and 4th epochs (Fig. 4; Tukey: $P < 0.03$).

Comparison of flexion and extension

Comparing ratios of anti-directional joint motion of joints between flexion and extension showed there was a significant interaction between movement and joints (Mixed ANOVA: $F [6, 119] = 8.14 < 0.001$). Following up the post hoc analysis showed the larger ratio of C0/C1 for flexion compared to extension (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.002$) and C5/C6 and C6/C7 showed larger ratio for extension compared to flexion (Fig. 3; Tukey: $P < 0.05$).

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Ratios of the 1st and last epochs were larger compared to other epochs. There was a significant main effects of epochs on the ratios of anti-directional motion (Mauchly's test $X^2(44) = 31.00$, $P=0.94$. RM-ANOVA: $F [9, 153] = 12.22$; $P<0.001$). Post hoc analysis showed larger ratios for the 1st epoch compared to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th epochs and also larger ratios of the last epoch compared to epochs from the 2nd to the 9th (Fig. 4; Tukey: $P<0.05$). However, there was no significant interaction or main effects of movement with Greenhouse-Geisser corrections.

DISCUSSION

Anti-directional motions were frequent and scattered through healthy cervical flexion and extension motion. This study quantifies the average anti-directional motion of cervical spine to approximately 40 degrees in flexion and extension with a ratio between anti- and pro-directional motions of approximately 40%.

Representative sample of motion pattern

Figure 1 & 2 show representative samples of cervical motion patterns found in this study. The patterns show large variations in pro- and anti-directional motions, this variation was found both within and between joints. The figures further show, that several joints reached the maximum joint motion excursion before end-range of neck motion. This diversity in motion patterns was not possible without the scattered anti-directional motion.

The method of image acquisition appears to influence anti-directional motions. Branney *et al* [6]. showed a representative subject with control of head and neck motion with a pivot

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mechanism, this subject showed smaller amounts of anti-directional motion in contrast to the free and unrestricted motions applied in this study and in another study by Reinartz *et al* [11].

Cervical anti-directional motion

Anti-directional joint motions have previously been reported for cervical joints; however the reports have not given quantified descriptions [6,10,12]. The unique anatomy of the upper cervical spine (C0-C2) has previously explained why C1 flexes when the neck is extending, and vice versa [19]. Without specifying the joints levels Craine *et al.* reported cases with flexion of the upper part of the lower cervical spine, while the lower part of the lower cervical spine extends, and vice versa [12]. The rationale for healthy anti-directional motion is unknown; however, factors which influence cervical ROM may also influence the proportions of pro- and anti-directional motions. Multiple factors such as cervical anatomy [19], posture [33], biomechanics [34], motor control [35], position sense [36] and cervical proprioception [37] influence healthy cervical ROM.

Deep cervical muscles

The deep cervical muscles are the only muscles, which can control anti-directional motions between adjacent joints. Thus, anti-directional motion may be associated with the muscle activity of the deep cervical muscles. Pain decreases the muscle activity of the deep cervical muscles and increases the muscle activity of superficial muscles [38], and pain [39], whiplash [40] or age [41–43] also reduces cervical ROM. However, the association between cervical pain and anti-directional motion is unknown.

*Healthy cervical flexion and extension includes anti-directional motion**Study limitations*

The actual ROM of C0/C1 to C6/C7 is similar to previously published studies [5,24,36,44]. However, sixteen of the subjects were between the age of 20 to 30 years and 6 of the 18 subjects were female. Larger studies of age and sex differences is necessary to clarify, how much the proportion of anti-directional motion is influenced by age or sex. Previous studies show that the cervical spine degenerates by age [29,45]. Women are reported to have larger cervical ROMs compared with males [41]. Other demographic or anatomical characteristics such as curvature, long, thin, short and fat neck may also influence the cervical ROM and the proportion of anti-directional motions [46].

Manual analysis of video-fluoroscopy has several limitations, the largest confounder is the measurement error; however, this analysis method is in agreement with other previous studies showing good reliability by high ICCs [1,9,24]. Out of plane sagittal motion is another confounder. Subjects were asked to follow a central line in order to reduce out of plane motions. Straps applied to control upper thoracic spine movement may reduce freedom of movements in the cervical spine. Upper thoracic spine and C7/T1 motion were not included in the study.

Clinical implications

The concept of normal and healthy anti-directional cervical motions challenges the current understanding of cervical motion in normative and diagnostic studies. An example is cervical joint assessment from palpation in tactile tests, and the gold standard interpretation does not include anti-directional motion. Pro-directional joint motion is recognized as normal, whereas no motion or anti-directional motion is considered a potential neck problem [47–51].

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However, healthy subjects demonstrate anti-directional motion and the present study suggests changing the current concepts of healthy cervical biomechanics to include anti-directional motions.

The present results also challenge the interpretation of healthy motion on cervical flexion and extension roentgen images. The common perception is that each joint should contribute to the resultant end-range motion. Flexion and extension roentgen images may not reflect the motion before end-range. The study indicates that considerable pro- and anti-directional flexion or extension joint motion may be present before end-range without any signs of this motion at end-range. The common interpretation of flexion and extension roentgen images is further challenged, when a small proportion of healthy joint moves predominantly anti-directional and contributes with anti-directional motion to the resultant end-range motion.

Conclusion

This is the first study to quantify anti-directional motions in flexion and extension. Anti-directional motions were scattered in large amounts throughout cervical flexion and extension. This study indicates that unidirectional hypo-mobility should have decreased value in clinical motion assessment compared to the present day standard. A better understanding of anti-directional motion may provide clinicians with better biomechanical information for diagnosis and rehabilitation.

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1 **Figure 1.** Show neck flexion from one representative male subject. Pro- and anti-directional
2 motion directions interchanged with occasional larger one-directional deviations. The
3 maximum flexion C2/C3 motion was reached in the 6th epoch, the maximum motion was
4 4.05°. Maximum flexion motions of C2/C3, C3/C4, C4/C5 and C6/C7 were reached before
5 end-range. Thus, these joints move in anti-directional flexion towards end-range.

6

7 **Figure 2.** Show neck extension from the subject in figure 1. Likewise, pro- and anti-
8 directional motion directions interchanged with larger one-directional deviation. The
9 maximum extension joint motion for C1/C2 and C5/C6 were reached before end-range, and
10 also noted that C0/C1 moves predominantly anti-directional with maximum anti-directional
11 motion in the 8th epoch.

12

13 **Figure 3.** Mean (+SD) ratio between anti- and pro-directional joint motion for flexion (light
14 gray bars) and extension (dark gray bars). For flexion, C0/C1 was significantly larger (*,
15 Tukey: $P < 0.001$) compared to C3/C4, C4/C5, C5/C6 and C6/C7 flexion, C1/C2 and C2/C3
16 were significantly larger (α , Tukey: $P < 0.02$) compared to C4/C5, C5/C6 and C6/C7 flexion.
17 For extension, C1/C2 and C2/C3 were significantly larger (\dagger , Tukey $P < 0.03$) compared to
18 C0/C1, C3/C4, C4/C5 and C5/C6 extension.

19

20 **Figure 4.** Mean (+SD) ratio between anti- and pro-directional motion in epochs for flexion
21 (light gray bars) and extension (dark gray bars). For flexion, the final epoch showed larger
22 ratio (Ω , Tukey: $P < 0.05$) compared to 2nd through 9th flexion epochs. For extension, the first and

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- 1 final epochs shower larger ratio (&, Tukey: $P < 0.04$) compared to 2nd, 3rd and 4th extension
- 2 epochs.
- 3

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1 Table 1. General characteristics of the subjects

	Male (12)	Female (6)
Age (year)	27.6 ± 5.4	24.3 ± 3.8
Height (cm)	179.1 ± 6.6	163.5 ± 6.0
Weight (kg)	74.1 ± 6.6	56.8 ± 7.5
BMI (kg/m ²)	23.0 ± 1.5	21.2 ± 2.4

2 Mean ± standard deviation. BMI indicates body mass index.

3

4

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1 **Supplementary 1** illustrates the experimental procedures. This experiment includes two
2 repeated flexion and extension motions from neutral to end-range position then back to
3 neutral position, however, only motions from neutral to end-range position were recorded by
4 video fluoroscopy and analyzed in this study. The return motions from end-range to neutral
5 position were not recorded. RF: Recorded flexion NRR: Not recorded return RE: Recorded
6 extension.

7
8 **Supplementary 2** illustrates marking points for identification of the joint angles. Four lead
9 balls served as external markers for the head (C0), two points on atlas (C1) were identified by
10 the central areas of the medullary cavities of the anterior and posterior arches. For
11 identification of C2 two points of the inferior vertebral plate were marked. The third to the
12 sixth cervical vertebrae (C3-C6) were identified with 4 points of the vertebral corners. The
13 seventh vertebra (C7) was identified with two points in proximity to the superior vertebral
14 plate. The joint angles were derived from the mid-planes calculated from the marking points.