Review

Methodologies to assess muscle co-contraction during gait in people with neurological impairment – A systematic literature review

Marlene Cristina Neves Rosa, Alda Marques, Sara Demain, Cheryl D. Metcalf, João Rodrigues

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Abstract

Purpose: To review the methodologies used to assess muscle co-contraction (MCo) with surface electromyography (sEMG) during gait in people with neurological impairment.

Methods: The Scopus (1995–2013), Web of Science (1970–2013), PubMed (1948–2013) and B-on (1999–2013) databases were searched. Articles were included when sEMG was used to assess MCo during gait in people with impairment due to central nervous system disorders (CNS).

Results: Nineteen articles met the inclusion criteria and most studied people with cerebral palsy and stroke. No consensus was identified for gait assessment protocols (surfaces, speed, distance), sEMG acquisition (electrodes position), analysis of sEMG data (filters, normalisation techniques) and quantification of MCo (agonist–antagonist linear envelopes overlapping or agonist–antagonist overlapping periods of muscles activity, onset delimited).

Conclusion: Given the wide range of methodologies employed, it is not possible to recommend the most appropriate for assessing MCo. Researchers should adopt recognized standards in future work. This is needed before consensus about the role that MCo plays in gait impairment in neurological diseases and its potential as a target for gait rehabilitation can be determined.

Keywords:
Co-contraction
Co-activation
Gait
Walking
Neurological diseases

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1. Introduction

Gait patterns are usually impaired in people with dysfunction of the Central Nervous System (CNS), such as stroke (Knutsson and Richards, 1979), traumatic brain injury (Chow et al., 2012), cerebral palsy (Hesse et al., 2000) or Parkinson’s disease (Dietz et al., 1981). Walking is a very complex function involving multiple interactions between muscle groups which can be adapted to enable walking at different speeds or on different surfaces (Winter, 2009). Neurological impairments can generate many deviations in muscle activity and gait kinematics from those seen in healthy individuals and reduce the ability to adapt gait appropriately to different environmental conditions. Gait patterns in people with neurological impairment have been characterized by abnormal muscle co-contraction, especially when postural stability is challenged (Lamontagne et al., 2000).

Muscle Co-contraction (MCo) is the mechanism that regulates simultaneous activity of agonist and antagonist muscles crossing the same joint (Busse et al., 2005). There is no consensus about the role that MCo plays in the various stages of recovery after CNS disease. However as MCo has been demonstrated to be important for providing adequate joint stability, movement accuracy and energy efficiency (Higginson et al. 2006) and adapting to environmental demands (Darainy and Ostry, 2008), its importance in neurological recovery is worthy of consideration.

Accurate determination of the impact of neurological impairment on MCo during gait requires robust measurement techniques which take careful consideration of the environmental conditions under which gait is assessed (Den Otter et al. 2004). For instance, walking on a ground surface instead of on a treadmill, walking at different speeds and for longer distances/duration would increase MCo recruitment and the variability between subjects (Parvatani et al. 2009; Knarr et al. 2012). The first research question addressed by this review therefore is:

What are the main characteristics of the gait assessment protocols particularly, the surfaces where people walked, the speed, distance and time spent walking? Which muscles have been assessed?

All measurement techniques, including sEMG, are liable to measurement error which can reduce validity and reliability and confound interpretation of the findings. MCo assessment during functional movements, such as walking, requires the analysis of the relative variations in agonist and antagonist contraction over time using surface electromyography (sEMG) equipment (Fonseca et al. 2001; Fonseca et al. 2004). Standards have been developed for reporting sEMG signals in different processing stages, such as the signal acquisition (Surface Electromyography for the Non-Invasive Assessment Muscles (SENIAM) guidelines), and analogue and digital analysis (International Society of Electrophysiology and Kinesiology (ISEK) guidelines) (Merletti 1999), but the implementation of these is variable. Despite these guidelines, controversies remain about the most appropriate techniques of sEMG signal analysis; (e.g., selection of normalisation technique) leading to inconsistencies across studies (Burden et al., 2003). Therefore, the second research question this review sought to answer is:

What are the main steps in the acquisition and analysis of the sEMG signals and which parameters have been considered when quantifying MCo?

A single definition of MCo would also be facilitate interpretation of MCo outcomes during walking. However MCo has been defined in different ways: the magnitude; the time; or a ratio between the magnitude and time of simultaneous activation of opposite muscles (Fonseca et al. 2001). As a result of different definitions, different formulas or computational approaches to quantify MCo have been employed (Fonseca et al. 2001). All these methodological differences limit the comparison of data across studies and the understanding of the mechanisms of MCo. The third research question for this review is therefore:

Which formulas or computational approaches have been used to quantify MCo?

This paper addresses the need to systematically review, synthesize and critique the methodologies used in this field, contributing to a better understanding of the mechanisms underpinning MCo and of its role in gait in people with CNS disease.

2. Methods

2.1. Variable of interest

The variable of interest in this study was MCo during gait, presented as the time and/or the magnitude of simultaneous contraction between opposite muscles (Fonseca et al. 2001).

2.2. Search strategy


The following search term (free text words) combinations were used in PubMed database: co-contraction AND gait, co-contraction AND locomotion, co-contraction AND Walking; co-activation AND gait; co-activation AND locomotion, co-activation AND walking. Search strategies in the other databases were derived from PubMed. The search terms were limited to titles and abstracts. The reference lists of all studies were also scanned to identify other potentially eligible articles.

The study was conducted using the systematic review method proposed by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) (Moher et al. 2009), as shown in Fig. 1. Full papers, written in English or Portuguese that met the following criteria were included if they: (i) studied gait impairment due to neurological diseases, such as stroke, Parkinson’s disease, cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury and other CNS dysfunctions; and ii) analysed MCo during gait of the lower or upper limb or trunk using sEMG. All articles were independently reviewed by two reviewers for relevance and quality using PRISMA (Moher et al. 2009). Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

3. Results

Fig. 1 portrays the number of articles identified, the numbers and reasons for exclusion and the total number of studies included in the final review A descriptive analysis of the methodologies (study design; sample; data collection protocol; sEMG data acquisition and analysis and quantification of MCo) of the included studies is presented in Table 1.

3.1. Study design and sample

Most studies included in this review had observational designs, with the exception of two experimental studies (Hesse et al. 2000; Massaad et al. 2010). The observational studies assessed MCo during gait with no intervention or program. From those studies, only...
one was longitudinal (Den Otter et al. 2006), with data collection over five time points. The experimental study used non-randomized control groups and assessed gait before and after an intervention (Concato 2004). With the exception of six articles (Hesse et al. 1999; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Keef er et al. 2004; Massaad et al. 2010) all others included a group of healthy participants to provide normative comparison of MCo. MCo during gait was studied in several neurological conditions including stroke (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Hesse et al. 1999; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Den Otter et al. 2006; Den Otter et al. 2007; Massaad et al. 2010; Chow et al. 2012), cerebral palsy (Leonard et al. 1991; Unnithan et al. 1996; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Keef er et al. 2004; Wakeling et al. 2007; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011), multiple sclerosis and cerebral tumor (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981), Parkinson’s disease (Dietz et al. 1981; Arias et al. 2012), traumatic brain injury (TBI) (Chow et al. 2012) and finally, myelopathy, sclerosis, amyotrophy and meningitis (Dietz et al. 1981).

Sample sizes varied from 5 (Leonard et al. 1991) to 30 participants (Lamontagne et al. 2000). In some studies, age (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Damiano et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Prosser et al. 2010) and gender (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Prosser et al. 2010) criteria were not well-matched between the group of people with CNS disorders and the healthy controls. Anthropometric data, including height and weight, were described in seven studies (Unnithan et al. 1996; Damiano et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011). The others described either weight (Hesse et al. 2000) or height (Massaad et al. 2010; Arias et al. 2012).

3.2. Research Question 1: What are the main characteristics of the gait assessment protocols particularly, the surfaces where people walked, the speed, distance and time spent walking? Which muscles were assessed?

Different surfaces were used to assess gait in the included studies. In some studies, a walkway (usually a corridor on the floor) was used (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Keef er et al. 2004; Wakeling et al. 2007; Assumpção et al. 2011; Arias et al. 2012; Chow et al. 2012), whereas in others participants walked on a treadmill (Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Unnithan et al. 1996; Hesse et al. 1999; Den Otter et al. 2006; Den Otter et al. 2007; Massaad et al. 2010; Prosser et al. 2010). Gait performance on a treadmill was compared to gait performance on the ground in one study (Hesse et al. 1999).

A wide variety of instructions were given to participants regarding the speed they should walk. A number of studies used a free/normal/self-selected speed (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Den Otter et al. 2007; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012). In three studies subjects were instructed to walk as quickly as possible (Unnithan et al. 1996; Hesse et al. 1999; Den Otter et al. 2006) but only in two of these studies, average gait speeds were reported: 0.27 m per second (Hesse et al. 1999); an average of 3 km per hour achieved when asking patients to walk at 90% of maximum speed during 2 min (Unnithan et al. 1996). Keefer et al. (2004) asked patients to perform three 5-min walking trials at 0.67, 0.89 and 1.12 m per second, controlled by a treadmill setting. One study (Arias et al. 2012) assessed walking in three different conditions: subjects were first instructed to walk at their preferred speed, then at fast speed and finally, to match their steps with a pulsing rhythm provided by a metronome (Arias et al. 2012). Moreover, in most studies (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Damiano et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Wakeling et al. 2007; Massaad et al. 2010; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011; Arias et al. 2012; Chow et al. 2012) impaired and healthy participants were given the same instructions but in 3 other studies (Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Chow et al. 2012) the healthy participants were asked to walk “very slowly” in an attempt to control for the effect of gait speed on MCo patterns.
Table 1
Descriptive analysis of the studies included on this systematic review. (EMG) electromyography; (MCo) muscle co-contraction; (MVC) maximum voluntary contraction; CMRR, common mode rejection ration, RMS, Root Mean Square.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Protocol to assess walking</th>
<th>EMG acquisition</th>
<th>EMG analysis</th>
<th>MCo quantification</th>
<th>Assessed muscles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knutsson and Richards (1979)</td>
<td>Subjects with spastic hemiparetic gait (n = 26)</td>
<td>Walking along 5 m</td>
<td>Hip abductor: 3 cm apart on a line perpendicular to middle fibers, mid away between trochanter major and punctum coxae</td>
<td>(1) Pre-amplifier a.c. (high-pass)</td>
<td>Time of antagonists muscles overlap/each 5% of the gait cycle</td>
<td>Hip abductor</td>
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<td>Hip adductor: electrodes 5 cm apart on a line between arcus pubis and epicondylus tibialis of femur ate the proximal third of the tigh (…)</td>
<td>(2) Envelope: rectification low pass filter at 1 Hz</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>69% males</td>
<td>At free speed</td>
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<td>(2) Normalised to 5% of each gait cycle duration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>19–71 y Healthy subjects (n = 10) 5% males 19–31 y</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dietz et al. (1981)</td>
<td>Subjects with spastic or rigidity gait (n = 20)</td>
<td>Walking on a treadmill</td>
<td>Not described</td>
<td>(1) Envelope: rectification low pass filter at 50 Hz</td>
<td>Smoothed digitally</td>
<td>Time of antagonists muscle activation/interval of 1/20 of one step cycle</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60% males</td>
<td>Walk as normal as possible, at least at 2 km/h</td>
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<td>(2) Normalised to 5% of each gait cycle duration</td>
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<td></td>
<td>31–73 y Healthy subjects (n = 20)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leonard et al. (1991)</td>
<td>Children with cerebral palsy walking with (n = 5), without support (n = 3) 3 months–6 y Healthy children walking with (n = 2), without support (n = 3) 2–22 months</td>
<td>Walking on a treadmill at a comfortable speed</td>
<td>Not described</td>
<td>(1) Filter: high pass 50 Hz low pass 1000 Hz</td>
<td>Temporally normalized to 100% of step duration</td>
<td>Time’s antagonists muscle activation/step cycle</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(1) Temporally normalized to 100% of step duration</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unnithan et al. (1996)</td>
<td>Children with cerebral palsy (n = 9)</td>
<td>Walking on a treadmill with total support in treadmill bars, supported around waist, totally unaided</td>
<td>Placed in pairs, interelectrode spacing of 4 cm: over vastus lateralis, middle of the hamstrings group, tibialis anterior and soleus</td>
<td>(1) Pre-amplifier CMRR10 MΩ</td>
<td>(1) Envelope: rectification; low-pass: 3 Hz</td>
<td>Index = area of envelope overlapping between, divided by number of data points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>78% males</td>
<td>At 3 km/h and 90% of maximum speed</td>
<td>Skin preparation: shaving, abrading and cleaning with alcohol</td>
<td>(2) Filter: high pass: 10 Hz Low pass: 500 Hz</td>
<td>(2) Normalised to the largest value observed in each muscle OR to MVC (3) Onset: sEMG assume values between 5% and 10% above the maximum voluntary contraction value Offset: not clear defined</td>
<td>Hamstrings</td>
</tr>
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<td>12, 7 ± 2, 8 y Healthy subjects (n = 8) 78% males 13, 6 ± 2, 1 y</td>
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</table>
Hesse et al. (1999)  Subjects with stroke (n = 18)  Treadmill (unsupported, with 15% of BWS, with 30% of BWS) and floor walking (15 m)  Attached 2 cm apart on the muscle bellies  (1) Pre-amplifier  (1) Filter: low-pass at 300 Hz; high-pass at 10 Hz  (1) Amount of simultaneously activity between two antagonists muscles  Affected side

77% males

Mean of velocity = 0.27 m/s

Conventional skin preparation

(2) Rectification

(2) Time of simultaneously activity between two antagonists muscles

35–77 y

Tibialis Anterior

Hesse et al. (2000)  Children with cerebral palsy (n = 23)  Botulinum toxin A were injected GAS; HAMS group  Not described  (1) Pre-amplifier  (1) Temporally normalised to the mean cycle duration

52% males

Children walked 10 m (twice), at their selected speed

Index = ([2 × common area A&B / 100% × Area A + Area B] Dividing the time of overlap between agonist and antagonist (over a threshold of 20 lV) by the duration of the gait phase; averaging co-activation values of 5–10 gait cycles

2–12 y

Tibialis Anterior

Lamontagne et al. (2000)  Subjects with stroke (n = 30)  Walk for 10 m  Longitudinal placed 1 cm apart over the upper third of the tibialis anterior; over the belly of medial gastrocnemius  (1) Pre-amplifiers: input impedance of 10 MΩ, CMRR of 93 dB  (1) High-pass Butterworth at 10 Hz  Temporal index: dividing the time of overlap between agonist and antagonist (over a threshold of 20 μV) by the duration of the gait phase; averaging co-activation values of 5–10 gait cycles

53% males

Subjects with stroke: walk at natural gait speed

Skin preparation: rubbed with alcohol

(2) Filter: high-pass at 20 Hz; low-pass at 800 Hz

(2) Linear envelope: rectification; smoothing using a 20 Hz low-pass filter

(3) Normalised to 100% of gait cycle

38–81 y

Healthy subjects: walk for very slow speed

Medial Gastrocnemius

Healthy subjects (n = 17)

52% males

43–75 y

Tibialis Anterior

Damiano et al. (2000)  Children with spastic cerebral palsy (n = 10)  Walk barefoot down a 12-m Not described  (1) Linear envelope: low-pass RMS filter at 5 Hz; low-pass RMS filter at 15 Hz

53% males

Subjects with stroke: walk at natural gait speed

Skin preparation: rubbed with alcohol

(2) Filter: high-pass at 20 Hz; low-pass at 800 Hz

(2) Linear envelope: rectification; smoothing using a 20 Hz low-pass filter

(3) Normalised to 100% of gait cycle

43–75 y

Healthy subjects: walk for very slow speed

Mean value of the area of overlap (the EMG minimum) of the linear envelopes of the two muscles EMG signal

Quadriceps

(continued on next page)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
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<th>EMG acquisition</th>
<th>EMG analysis</th>
<th>MCo quantification</th>
<th>Assessed muscles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lamontagne et al. (2002)</td>
<td>Subjects with stroke (n = 30)</td>
<td>Walk along 10 m</td>
<td>Skin preparation: rubbed with alcohol; electrodes placed 1 cm apart over the upper third of the tibialis anterior; over the belly of medial gastrocnemius</td>
<td>1) Pre-amplifiers: input impedance of 10 MΩ, CMRR of 93 dB</td>
<td>1) High-pass Butterworth at 10 Hz</td>
<td>Hamstrings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detrembleur et al. (2003)</td>
<td>Subjects with chronic stroke (n = 9)</td>
<td>Walk across 10 m</td>
<td>SENIAM recommendations for electrodes placement and skin preparation</td>
<td>1) Rectification</td>
<td>2) Filters: high-pass at 25 Hz + low-pass at 300 Hz</td>
<td>Tibialis Anterior, Gastrocnemius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keefer et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Children with spastic hemiplegic (n = 13)</td>
<td>Three 5-min walking trials at: 0.67, 0.89 and 1.12 m/s</td>
<td>Halfway between the midportion and distal end of the muscle; fastened with double-sided</td>
<td>1) Pre-amplifiers: CMRR of 87 dB at 60 Hz</td>
<td>1) Envelope: rectification; smoothing: low-pass second order zero-lag Butterworth at 3 Hz</td>
<td>Rectus Femoris, Biceps Femoris, Tibialis Anterior, Gastrocnemius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Den Otter et al. (2006)</td>
<td>Subjects with stroke (n = 14)</td>
<td>Walking on a treadmill: as early as possible after admission; 1, 3, 6 and 10 weeks after baseline</td>
<td>SENIAM recommendations for electrodes placement and skin preparation</td>
<td>1) Pre-amplifiers: noise level of 1 μV, CMRR &gt;95 dB</td>
<td>1) High pass filter at 10 Hz</td>
<td>Biceps Femoris, Rectus Femoris, Medialis Gastrocnemius, Tibialis Anterior</td>
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### Notes:
- **Skin preparation:**
  - rubbed with alcohol
  - shaved, abraded, cleaned with alcohol

- **EMG acquisition**:
  - Analogic-processing
  - Digital Processing

- **EMG analysis**:
  - Normalised to MVC
  - Index = the minimal EMG value/maximal EMG value in each time of point

- **MCo quantification**:
  - Temporal index = time during which an overlapping surface (threshold of 20 μV) of GAS and TA in each gait phase of interest was averaged by 10 gait cycles
  - Index = 2 × [common area between agonist and antagonist/area of ag. + area of ant.] × 100

- **Assessed muscles**:
  - Tibialis Anterior
  - Medialis Gastrocnemius
  - Biceps Femoris
  - Rectus Femoris
Den Otter et al. (2007)

Subjects with stroke (N = 14)

43% males
42, 8 y ± 12, 3 y

Walking on a treadmill for 40 s

SENIAM recommendations for electrodes placement and skin preparation;

(1) Pre-amplifiers: noise level of 1 μV, CMRR >95 db

(1) High pass filter at 10 Hz

Relative amount of time that two muscles were simultaneously active (based on dichotomised signals)

Biceps Femoris

42% males

Tested a self-selected speed

(2) Filter: high-pass 3rd order Butterworth (–3 dB, at 20 Hz); low pass 2nd order Butterworth filter (–3 dB, at 500 Hz)

Rectus Femoris

58, 58 ± 13, 17 y

Healthy subjects (n = 14)
43% male
42, 85 ± 12, 3 y

Walked 5–10 times along 12 m walkway

Not described

(3) Normalised to 100% in time of gait cycle

Medialis
Gastrocnemius
Tibialis Anterior

Subjects with spastic cerebral palsy (n = 17)

4–21 y

Healthy subjects (n = 36)
3–21 y

At their self-selected speed

Wakeling et al. (2007)

Massaad et al. (2010)
Belgium

Subjects with chronic stroke (n = 10)

18 training sessions

Not described

–30 min walking in a treadmill with feedback of the CM displacement (3 trials, 10 min each)

Walking period increase 5 min every 2 weeks

At comfortable speed

(1) Wavelet analysis

Correlation spectra between two antagonists muscles

Rectus Femoris
Semimembranosus
Medial Gastrocnemius
Tibialis Anterior

(2) Intensity spectrum

(2) Filter: high pass at 25 Hz; low pass at 300 Hz

Index: temporal quantified as the % of stride during which these antagonistic muscles were simultaneously activate

Vastus Lateralis
Biceps Femoris
Tibialis Anterior
Medial Gastrocnemius

(3) Normalised to 100% in

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author (year)</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Protocol to assess walking</th>
<th>EMG acquisition Electodes location/skin preparation</th>
<th>EMG analysis Analogic-processing</th>
<th>MCo quantification Digital Processing</th>
<th>Assessed muscles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prosser et al. (2010)</td>
<td>47 ± 13 y Children with Cerebral palsy (&lt;i&gt;n&lt;/i&gt; = 15) 67% males 25–108 months Children with typical development (&lt;i&gt;n&lt;/i&gt; = 16) 44% 13–67, 5 months</td>
<td>Walked barefoot down an instrumented walkway At self-selected speed</td>
<td>SENIAM recommendations for electrodes placement and skin preparation</td>
<td>(1) Pre-amplifier: gain of 10</td>
<td>Time’s antagonists muscles were simultaneously active</td>
<td>Trapezius</td>
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<td>(1) Filter: low-pass Butterworth of 2nd order at 10 Hz</td>
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<td>Gluteus Maximus</td>
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<td>Gluteus Medialis</td>
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<td>(2) Filter: high pass at 20 Hz; Low pass at 450 Hz</td>
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<td>Rectus Femoris</td>
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<td>(2) Onset: using a Teager–Kaiser energy operator, an automatic filtering and de-noising approach</td>
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<td>Semitendinosus</td>
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<td>(3) Linear Envelope: rectification Smoothing with filter at 6 Hz</td>
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<td>Erector spinae</td>
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<td>Rectus abdominis</td>
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<td>(2) Low-pass filter at 500 Hz</td>
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<td>Magnitude: overlap of the EMG curves between antagonist muscles</td>
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<td>(3) Linear Envelope: rectification Smoothing with low-pass 2nd order Butterworth at 10 Hz</td>
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<td>(4) Normalised to the averaged amplitude of each muscle over the entire gait cycle</td>
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<td>Assumpção et al. (2011)</td>
<td>Children with cerebral palsy (&lt;i&gt;n&lt;/i&gt; = 23) 57% 7–14 y Children with typical development (&lt;i&gt;n&lt;/i&gt; = 16) 50% 9, 9–2 y</td>
<td>Walk along a corridor, at least during 10 s</td>
<td>SENIAM recommendations for electrodes placement and skin preparation</td>
<td>(1) Pre-amplifier: CMRR of 110 dB</td>
<td>Index = minimum EMG/Maximum EMG/each point of the gait cycle; (averaged over 5 gait cycles)</td>
<td>Rectus Femoris</td>
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<td>(1) High-pass filter at 10 Hz</td>
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<td>(2) Low-pass filter at 500 Hz</td>
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<td>(3) Linear Envelope: rectification Smoothing with filter at 6 Hz</td>
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<td>(4) Normalised to the averaged amplitude of each muscle over the entire gait cycle</td>
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<td>Chow et al. (2012)</td>
<td>Subjects with chronic stroke (&lt;i&gt;n&lt;/i&gt; = 11) 27% males 41 ± 9 y Matched healthy subjects (&lt;i&gt;n&lt;/i&gt; = 11)</td>
<td>Walking 7 m (8–10 times) Stroke and TBI subjects at a self-selected free speed Healthy subjects at a self-selected very slow speed</td>
<td>Cram and Kasman recommendations (1998) for electrodes placement and skin preparation</td>
<td>(1) Pre-amplifier: input impedance of 31 kΩ, CMRR &gt;50 dB</td>
<td>Index = area of agonist–antagonist muscles/overlap duration Duration = duration of overlap, as % of the phase duration</td>
<td>Medial Gastrocnemius</td>
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<td>(1) Filter: high pass at 10Hz; low pass at 500 Hz</td>
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<td>(2) Linear envelope: Rectification; Smoothing with low-pass 2nd order Butterworth at 10 Hz</td>
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<td>Tibialis Anterior</td>
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<td>(3) Normalised to the averaged amplitude of each muscle over the entire gait cycle</td>
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<td>(4) Onset: sEMG signal exceeded three standard deviations of the mean Offset: not clear defined</td>
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The walking distance or the time spent walking also varied: four studies (Lamontagne et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2001; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Detrembleur et al. 2003) asked participants to walk 10 m and Knutsson and Richards (1979) and Chow et al. (2012) used 5 m. Distances longer than 10 m were also used by Hesse et al. (1999), Damiano et al. (2000) and Arias et al. (2012); whilst the time spent walking was the criterion used to define the protocol in the other studies, ranging from 40 s (at a maximum speed) (Keefer et al. 2004) to 30 min (at a comfortable speed) (Massaad et al. 2010).

MCo was acquired from different muscles during gait performance. Four studies assessed thigh muscles (Damiano et al. 2000; Keefer et al. 2004; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011), five studies assessed only shank muscles (Dietz et al. 1981; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Arias et al. 2012; Chow et al. 2012) whilst the others assessed muscles of the entire lower limb. Only one study assessed MCo from trunk muscles and (Prosser et al. 2010) there were no articles assessing MCo of the upper limb or any other body structures during gait.

3.3. Research Question 2: What were the main steps in the acquisition and analysis of the sEMG signals and which parameters were considered when quantifying MCo?

Data acquisition was inconsistent across studies. Only five studies followed the SENIAM recommendations for both electrode placement and skin preparation (Detrembleur et al. 2003; Den Oter et al. 2006; Den Oter et al. 2007; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011). Six studies did not describe electrode position (Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Wakeling et al. 2007; Massaad et al. 2010); only one of these described how the skin was prepared (Damiano et al. 2000).

The analogue and digital processing of the sEMG signal was performed differently across studies. Analogue processing usually involves two main steps: pre-amplification and application of filters. However, two older studies (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981) included in this review, used analogue techniques to construct the linear envelope (LE) of the signal.

Several amplifiers were employed, with different values of common mode rejection ratio and input impedance, assuming values from 50 dB (Chow et al. 2012) to 110 dB (Assumpção et al. 2011) and values from 10 k\(\Omega\) (Unnithan et al. 1996; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002) to 31 M\(\Omega\) (Chow et al. 2012) respectively.

Analogue filter characteristics were also different, assuming high-pass cut-off values of 10 Hz (Unnithan et al. 1996), 20 Hz (Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Keefer et al. 2004; Den Oter et al. 2006; Den Oter et al. 2007; Prosser et al. 2010; Arias et al. 2012) or 50 Hz (Leonard et al. 1991) and low-pass cut-off frequencies of 450 Hz (Prosser et al. 2010; Arias et al. 2012), 500 Hz (Unnithan et al. 1996; Den Oter et al. 2006; Den Oter et al. 2007), 800 Hz (Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002), 1000 Hz (Leonard et al. 1991) or 4000 Hz (Keefer et al. 2004). Digital filters employed in studies also had different low and high cut-off frequencies. Low cut-off frequencies ranged from 300 Hz (Hesse et al. 1999; Detrembleur et al. 2003; Massaad et al. 2010) to 500 Hz (Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012) and high cut-off frequencies ranged from 10 Hz (Hesse et al. 1999; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Den Oter et al. 2006; Den Oter et al. 2007; Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012) and 25 Hz (Detrembleur et al. 2003; Massaad et al. 2010).

A LE was digitally constructed in the majority of studies, however a wide range of smoothing parameters (low-pass filters) were used: 3 Hz (Unnithan et al. 1996; Keefer et al. 2004), 6 Hz (Assumpção et al. 2011), 10 Hz (Chow et al. 2012), 20 Hz (Dami-
Normalization is a procedure of referencing EMG data to a standard value, allowing data comparison between muscles, across time and between subjects (Soderberg and Knutsson, 2000; Burden et al. 2003). EMG signals can be normalized using temporal and amplitude parameters. Different temporal parameters were used in the included studies: each 5% of gait cycle duration (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981); 100% of step cycle duration (Leonard et al. 1991); mean cycle duration and 100% of gait cycle duration (Damiano et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Dietrembleur et al. 2003; Keefer et al. 2004; Den Otter et al. 2006; Den Otter et al. 2007). Amplitude parameters were also different across the studies: mean amplitude (Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012) or peak value (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Unnithan et al. 1996; Arias et al. 2012) in each gait cycle; mean amplitude of a total of three gait cycles (Keefer et al. 2004); and, mean value or largest value of maximal voluntary contraction (MVC) (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Unnithan et al. 1996). Lamontagne et al. (2000, 2002) questioned the value of normalizing data, claiming that selection of a single maximum value could be affected by electrical noise and that the muscle activity recorded during maximal voluntary strength could be very different in healthy subjects and those with stroke. Therefore, these authors did not apply any amplitude normalization, quantifying MCo using absolute sEMG values.

Several intensity and timing parameters were considered in the analysis of sEMG during gait. The following intensity parameters were used to analyse the sEMG signal: the peak amplitude in each gait cycle (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002), the area of the envelope (Unnithan et al. 1996; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Dietrembleur et al. 2003; Keefer et al. 2004; Assumpção et al. 2011; Arias et al. 2012; Chow et al. 2012) or a mean value of it (Damiano et al. 2000). Duration of muscle activity depends on accurate determination of the onset and offset of muscle contraction. Muscle contraction onset is a parameter used to mark the beginning of muscle activity and it was determined by using various computerized methods (Unnithan et al. 1996; Hesse et al. 2000; Prosser et al. 2010; Chow et al. 2012) or by visual inspection of the sEMG signal (Dietrembleur et al. 2003). Within the computerized methods, Unnithan et al. (1996) determined onset when sEMG assume values between 5% and 10% above the maximum voluntary contraction value; Hesse et al. (2000) identified onset as any significant burst which achieved at least 10% of a maximum sEMG recorded and lasted at least 5% of a cycle duration; Prosser et al. (2010) determined onset periods using a Teager-Kaiser energy operator, an automatic filtering and de-noising approach; Chow et al. (2012) determined onset when the sEMG signal exceeded three standard deviations of the mean. Visual inspection, to define muscle onsets, was performed in one study by two independent raters observing graphs of previously averaged and normalized sEMG data, (Hesse et al. 1999). A consensus of opinion between both raters determined the definition of muscle temporal patterns. No information was provided about the determination of offsets in any of the included papers.

3.4. Research Question 3: Which formulas or computational approaches have been used to quantify MCo?

MCo was quantified using different formulas or computational approaches. Two different approaches were used to quantify the temporal MCo: i) the time of overlap between LE of two opposite muscles (Unnithan et al. 1996; Damiano et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012) and ii) the time of overlap between activity periods (onset delimited) of opposite muscles (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Dietrembleur et al. 2003; Den Otter et al. 2006; Massaad et al. 2010; Prosser et al. 2010).

To quantify the magnitude of MCo, Hesse et al. (2000), Keefer et al. (2004) and Arias et al. (2012) divided the common area of the LE of antagonist muscles by the sum of the areas of those muscles. Unnithan et al. (1996) divided the common area of LE between two muscles by the number of data points and Assumpção et al. (2011) and Damiano et al. (2000) calculated the difference between the minimum and maximum values of opposite muscles in each point of the gait cycle. The amount of MCo was also measured using (i) the mean value of the area of overlap (Damiano et al. 2000), (ii) a correlation between the spectra of two opposite muscles (Wakeling et al. 2007), (iii) a quantification of the area of overlap between opposite muscles (Assumpção et al. 2011) or (iv) dividing this area by the overlap duration (Chow et al. 2012).

4. Discussion

This systematic review explored the methodologies used to assess MCo during gait in people with CNS disorders, that in most cases were stroke and cerebral palsy (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Dietrembleur et al. 2003; Keefer et al. 2004; Den Otter et al. 2006; Den Otter et al. 2007; Wakeling et al. 2007; Massaad et al. 2010; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012). Given the considerable variability in the methods used to assess gait, analyse sEMG and quantify MCo, no recommendations can be made at this time about the most appropriate methodologies to assess MCo during gait in people with CNS disorders.

Several differences were found in the gait protocols of the included studies, including the walking speed, ground surface and duration or the distance that people walked. Walking speed is known to influence muscle activity in both healthy people and those with impairment (Hesse et al. 2001). In the majority of studies, participants were instructed to walk at their self-selected speed (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Damiano et al. 2000; Hesse et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Dietrembleur et al. 2003; Keefer et al. 2004; Den Otter et al. 2006; Den Otter et al. 2007; Wakeling et al. 2007; Massaad et al. 2010; Prosser et al. 2010; Assumpção et al. 2011; Chow et al. 2012). However, as the self-selected speed of healthy subjects is obviously different from those with CNS disorders, some authors (Lamontagne et al. 2000; Lamontagne et al. 2002; Chow et al. 2012) tried to control for the influence of speed on gait pattern and match data capture conditions by instructing controls to walk at a very slow speed. However, subjects are walking under unusual circumstances which may increase postural instability (Den Otter et al. 2004) and may cause different muscle activity bursts (Lingling et al. 2010). This may not therefore be the most appropriate methodology for defining speed during gait. Self-selected gait speed for both healthy people and people with CNS disorders might be the most accurate methodology for comparing sEMG data.

Ground surface is also known to influence muscle activity. In subjects with stroke, there is a tendency to increase cadence and to induce muscle activity modifications (e.g., earlier muscle contraction onset) during treadmill walking, compared with walking on the ground (Harris-Love et al., 2004). This makes comparison between the results obtained in ground walking (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al. 1981; Leonard et al. 1991; Hesse et al. 1999; Dietrembleur et al. 2003; Den Otter et al. 2006; Massaad et al. 2010; Prosser et al. 2010) and treadmill walking very
difficult (Dietz et al., 1981; Leonard et al., 1991; Unnithan et al., 1996; Den Otter et al., 2006; Massaad et al., 2010; Prosser et al., 2010). There are, however, practical reasons why the different surfaces may have been selected for use with people with CNS disorders. Treadmill walking offers a more restricted space, protective bars and better monitoring conditions to enhance safety in people with poor balance (Laufer et al., 2001). However, studies using ground walking are more reflective of everyday life and may be easier and cheaper to conduct. A validation study exploring what incline grade a treadmill should be at to more closely replicate walking on a ground surface (Laufer et al., 2001; Mason et al., 2013) would be a useful future step.

Subjects with CNS disorders tend to increase their MCo magnitude to be able to walk longer or further, resulting in inefficient MCo strategies and abnormal walking patterns and potentially contributing to fatigue and muscle pain (Dean et al., 2001; Brunner and Romkes, 2008). Recommendations to the most appropriate walking distance or time for use in sEMG studies are therefore needed.

Despite publication of the SENIAM guidelines for sensor placement procedures in 1996 (Hermens et al., 2000) and of ISEK guidelines for reporting sEMG data acquisition (Merletti, 1999) and signal analysis in 1999, many studies in this review did not adhere to the recommendations nor offer justification for their lack of adherence. The fulfillment of these guidelines is determinant for the analysis of MCo, as it affects the characteristics of the sEMG signal recorded from opposite muscles (Fonseca et al., 2001).

In terms of sensor placement, the first study from this review to follow these guidelines was from 2003 (Detrembleur et al., 2003) but a further five later studies (Keefer et al., 2004; Wakeling et al., 2007; Massaad et al., 2010; Arias et al., 2012; Chow et al., 2012) did not follow the SENIAM acquisition recommendations.

In terms of signal processing analysis, the use of bandwidth amplifier filters within the range of 5–500 Hz and the use of low pass filters at 5 or 6 Hz to smooth the full-wave rectified signal, constructing a LE (Merletti, 1999) were important ISEK recommendations. However, most studies in this review used amplifier filters with characteristics different from those recommended (Merletti, 1999), high-pass cut-offs at 20 Hz (Lamontagne et al., 2000; Lamontagne et al., 2002; Keefer et al., 2004; Den Otter et al., 2006; Den Otter et al., 2007; Prosser et al., 2010) and low-pass cut-offs varied from 4000 Hz (Keefer et al., 2004) to 450 Hz (Prosser et al., 2010) Only Assumpção et al. (2011) used a 6 Hz low-pass filter to construct a LE, following the recommendations (Merletti, 1999). Differences in sEMG data acquisition and analysis of the included studies hinder the comparison of results across studies, therefore future research should strictly adhere to the SENIAM and ISEK recommendations or be able to offer a scientific justification for non-adherence.

There are no guidelines for the most adequate procedures for normalizing sEMG signal during gait (Burden et al., 2003). Temporal normalization was the most commonly used procedure in the included studies (Dietz et al., 1981; Hesse et al., 2000; Lamontagne et al., 2000; Detrembleur et al., 2003; Massaad et al., 2010; Assumpção et al., 2011). Temporal normalization involves defining a reference time period (e.g., each 5% of gait cycle) to enable comparison between individuals, across muscles or between trials. The use of temporal normalization alone, in the absence of any other method of normalization, has been criticized because it ignores the relative amplitude of the signal, potentially resulting in signals of inappropriate amplitudes being considered as normal (Bogey et al., 1992).

Determining the most appropriate method for normalizing sEMG amplitude is controversial. The aim of this procedure is to express the activity between muscles, across time and between individuals in relation to a reference value obtained during standard and reproducible conditions (Burden and Bartlett, 1999).

Three studies recorded reference values during maximum isometric voluntary contraction (MVC) (Dietz et al., 1981; Unnithan et al., 1996; Damiano et al., 2000); however, in patients with neurological conditions, this may not represent the maximum activation capacity of the muscle, resulting in increased inter-subject variation (Burden and Bartlett, 1999). The mean ensemble value (mean value reached within a period) was used in three other studies (Keefer et al., 2004; Assumpção et al., 2011; Chow et al., 2012). Mean ensemble value and peak ensemble value (maximum value reached within a period), have both been considered feasible methods for normalizing data from neurological patients (Yang and Winter, 1984). These methods consist of dividing each sEMG data point by the mean or the peak value recorded from the same sEMG portion of data (Burden et al., 2003). These are more reliable methods as they have the capacity to reduce inter-subject variability (Yang and Winter, 1984).

The area of overlap between the LE of opposite muscles was used in eight studies (Damiano et al., 2000; Hesse et al., 2000; Lamontagne et al., 2000; Lamontagne et al., 2002; Keefer et al., 2004; Assumpção et al., 2011; Arias et al., 2012; Chow et al., 2012) to achieve a value of time or intensity of MCo during gait. The mean value of overlap could also be an important parameter for quantifying MCo (Damiano et al., 2000). An index based on the area of overlap between the LE of two opposing muscles in a specific time window was used in two studies (Unnithan et al., 1996; Chow et al., 2012). A LE is a linear distribution of amplitudes at each gait cycle interval proposed (Shiavi et al., 1998) as a good method for studying synergy patterns during gait. However, various factors in the EMG measurement process might influence the establishment of representative LE’s profiles, such as electrode location, thickness of subcutaneous tissues or the system used to detect the signal (Farina et al., 2004) and therefore using amplitude parameters for comparative purposes has been criticised (Farina et al., 2004). LE repeatability can be improved by precision in electrode placement and skin preparation and by following recommendations for sEMG signal analysis (Arsenault et al., 1986; Shiavi et al., 1998): between six and ten strides, depending on the variability of each muscle assessed and an envelope filter with a cut-off frequency 8.9 Hz are recommended. However some authors (Morey-Klapsing et al., 2004; Raez et al., 2006) remain critical of the use of amplitude parameters for inter-subject comparison.

An alternative method used to quantify MCo in the studies in this review, was the estimation of time during which opposing muscles are active (Knutsson and Richards, 1979; Dietz et al., 1981; Shiavi et al., 1998; Detrembleur et al., 2003; Den Otter et al., 2006; Massaad et al., 2010; Prosser et al., 2010). This method depends on the accuracy of the process used to detect muscle contraction onset (Kerem et al., 2010). At least three different processes have been used: visual inspection, threshold computation and automated algorithms (Kerem et al., 2010). Variability within the automatic methods has also been found as both simple (intensity) (Unnithan et al., 1996; Chow et al., 2012) and double (time and intensity) (Hesse et al., 2000) threshold methods have been used. Double-threshold methods have some potential to eliminate false positives or delayed onset detection, however the establishment of thresholds were inconsistent across studies (Staufer et al., 2001). This variability hinders the comparison of temporal MCo patterns and therefore a consensus on temporal automatic methods is needed, improving the sensitivity of the thresholds to the signal parameters.

The variability found in the methods used to estimate MCo and the lack of reliability of sEMG intensity parameters makes it difficult to compare MCo patterns between studies. Further research should therefore follow guidelines for sEMG data acquisition and analysis and reach a consensus on the temporal MCo estimation.
5. Limitations

This review was limited to studies investigating gait in people with neurological impairment in order to minimize methodological variability which would occur due to the specific requirements of different populations (Burden et al., 2003). However, further reviews on MCo during gait in other disorders such as osteoarticular (Heiden et al., 2009), ligament (Chmielewski et al., 2005) or developmental disorders (Gontijo et al., 2008) are still required. Such reviews may facilitate the generation of methodological consensus across a range of conditions. In addition, only articles written in Portuguese and English were included in this systematic review narrowing the number of eligible articles.

6. Conclusion

A systematic review was undertaken to review the literature concerning the methodologies used for measuring MCo during gait in people with neurological impairment due to CNS disorders. It was not possible to make recommendations about the most appropriate methodologies for assessing MCo during gait in people with CNS disorders because of the considerable range of gait protocols and methods for the acquisition, analysis of sEMG and quantification of MCo. The area of overlap between the LE of opposite cols and methods for the acquisition, analysis of sEMG and quantification of MCo. However, improving repeatability of MCo outcomes methodological criteria for sEMG data collection must be fulfilled and the automatic methods for determining double-thresholds validated.

Given that MCo is being considered as a potential parameter to target in gait rehabilitation (Den Otter et al., 2006) more robust standardized methods of evaluation and a rigorous adherence to SENIAM and ISEK guidelines are required.

Conflict of Interest

We wish to confirm that there are no known conflicts of interest associated with this publication and there has been no significant financial support for this work that could have influenced its outcome.

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References

Marlene Rosa received her Degree of Physiotherapy in 2001 from School of Health Sciences in University of Aveiro. She completed her Masters in Motor Development at Sports Faculty in University of Porto. In her Master thesis it was explored the motor control during the recovery of the hemiparetic upper limb post-stroke. She has currently a PhD grant funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) - Portugal, working in the Department of Health Sciences (Secção Autónoma de Ciências da Saúde – SACS), at University of Aveiro and focusing her research interests in the study of muscle co-contraction during walking post-stroke.

Alda Marques graduated in physiotherapy at Escola Superior de Tecnologias da Saúde de Coimbra, Portugal (1999). Her Master degree was obtained in Biomechanics of the development at Faculdade de Ciências do Desporto e Educação Física da Universidade de Coimbra, Portugal (2003). Marques obtained her PhD degree in 2008 funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT), Portugal, working on a joint project between the School of Health Sciences, Faculty of Medicine, Health and Life Sciences and the Institute of Sound and Vibration Research, University of Southampton, United Kingdom. Since 2009, Marques has been principal investigator of several funded research projects on respiratory sounds, respiratory rehabilitation and dementia. She has also lead an integrated action and has been a researcher of other research projects. Her current research focus explores the development and implementation of new measures and healthcare technologies to be use in rehabilitation interventions (e.g., respiratory acoustics as a diagnostic and monitoring measure), and designing innovative rehabilitation programs for people with chronic diseases (e.g., Stroke, COPD, Chronic Kidney Failure). Marques is author of several international publications and is currently a senior lecturer and a researcher at Escola Superior de Saúde (School of Health Sciences), University of Aveiro, Portugal.

Sara Demain qualified as a physiotherapist in 1990. She worked in NHS hospitals in the Midlands, specialising in neurological rehabilitation. Sara completed an MSc in Rehabilitation before becoming a Lecturer in Physiotherapy at the University of Southampton, where she teaches neurology and research methods. All of Sara’s research focuses on the psychosocial processes affecting neurological rehabilitation; for instance Sara’s PhD explored the process of discharge from physiotherapy following stroke. Sara has recently been awarded an NIHR post-doctoral fellowship to explore the burdens generated by stroke rehabilitation.

Cheryl D. Metcalf completed a prestigious Research Council’s (U.K.) Roberts Fellowship in Life Sciences Interface at the University of Southampton, South- ampton, U.K and is currently a Lecturer in Biome- chanics in the Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southampton. Her research interests include the hand and wrist biomechanics in unimpaired, neuro- logical and musculoskeletal impairment, kinematic assessment of complex skill acquisition, developing and assessing health technology for home-based evaluation and assessment. She is particularly inter- ested in technologies that measure movement and function, and developing novel methods of capturing this information.

João Rodrigues earned his degree in Electronics and Telecommunications Engineering in 1992 at the University of Aveiro. His MSc (1995) and PhD (2004) works were on the compression of audio signals by exploring the perceptual limitations of human hearing. He has since been working in other applications of signal processing, mainly in robotics, computational biology, and the analysis of biomedical signals. He is currently an assistant professor at the University of Aveiro.