Ideal Length of Thread Forms for Screws Used in Screw Fixation of Nondisplaced Femoral Neck Fractures

Citation

Liu, Christina. 2019. Ideal Length of Thread Forms for Screws Used in Screw Fixation of Nondisplaced Femoral Neck Fractures. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard Medical School.

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DATE: 15 January 2019

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TITLE: Ideal Length of Thread Forms for Screws Used in Screw Fixation of Nondisplaced Femoral Neck Fractures

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ABSTRACT

TITLE: Ideal Length of Thread Forms for Screws Used in Screw Fixation of Nondisplaced Femoral Neck Fractures

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PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to determine the thread length that will maximize purchase within the femoral head while minimizing risk of crossing the fracture line. Additional analysis was conducted to identify factors associated with the maximal possible length of treads in minimally and non-displaced femoral neck fractures.

METHODS: We performed a retrospective study of all patients treated for a minimally or non-displaced femoral neck fracture from April 1, 2004 through December 31, 2017. Only patients who had received a pre-operative CT or MRI scan were included. Fixation was then templated using radiographs and the distance from the subchondral bone to the fracture line was then measured.

RESULTS: The study included 127 patients. The average estimated length of lag screw threads was $33.2 \pm 6.67\text{mm}$, with lower quartile of 29.1mm and higher quartile of 37.2mm. The median was 32.0mm and most frequently encountered estimate was 29mm. Estimated lag screw size did not differ significantly based on age or BMI, but both height ($p < 0.001$) and race (0.04) were positively correlated with estimated lag screw size and males had longer measurements compared to females, $37.2 \pm 7.0\text{mm}$ vs $31.4 \pm 5.7\text{mm}$ ($p < 0.001$), respectively.

CONCLUSION: In conclusion, we propose an additional lag screw thread form with length 26.0mm to capture 90% of femoral neck fractures.

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACS: American College of Surgeons

AVN: avascular necrosis

BMI: body mass index

CT: computerized tomography

MRI: magnetic resonance imaging

RCT: randomized controlled trial

XR: x-ray radiography

STATEMENT OF SCHOLARLY PROJECT QUESTION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Hip fractures are commonly seen in the United States and it is frequently treated by internal fixation with cannulated lag screws, especially in those under 60 or have good bone health. Most major manufactures offer two standard thread lengths for cannulated lag screws, but oftentimes the longer thread length is too long and will cross fracture lines, thus losing the compressive force across the fracture.

The purpose of this project was to determine the thread length(s) of lag screws that will maximize purchase within the femoral head while minimizing risk of crossing the fracture line. Additional analysis was conducted to identify factors associated with the maximal possible length of threads in minimally and non-displaced femoral neck fractures.

As first author, I helped design the project, applied for IRB approval, collected all data, performed all statistical analysis with support from Harvard Catalyst, and drafted the manuscript. The statisticians at Harvard Catalyst conducted linear regression analysis using SPSS. Manuscript has been submitted to *Injury*. Contributors helped with patient and case identification for inclusion in project.

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2008 there were almost 341,000 emergency department visits in the United States for hip fractures ¹. That number is projected to surpass 500,000 annually by 2040 ². The majority of hip fractures are femoral neck fractures that occur in elderly patients as a result of low-energy trauma ³.

Cannulated screws are the most commonly used implant for internal fixation of femoral neck fractures ⁴, especially in those under 60 or have good bone health ⁵, given the quick recovery, short operative time, and low blood loss ^{6,7}. Most major manufactures offer two standard thread lengths listed in Table 1. To optimize purchase within the bone and improve compression across the fracture plane it is important to maximize the amount of screw threads within the femoral head fragment ^{8,9}. However, to achieve optimal compression between the fracture fragments, it is important for all the tread-forms to be across the fracture site ¹⁰. Though a longer thread form has a higher risk of crossing fracture lines, the greater thread area also offers greater compression across fractures as shown in cadaveric femoral heads ¹¹. While a recent RCT showed no significant difference in outcomes between the 16mm and the 32mm screw in terms of nonunion, AVN, or re-operation it was underpowered to detect a subtle difference between implants ¹². There is no study to our knowledge that describes the ideal length of thread-forms for cannulated screws in the fixation of femoral neck fractures.

The primary aim of this study is to identify the thread length that will maximize purchase within the bone while minimizing risk of the tread-forms from crossing the fracture line in minimally and non-displaced femoral neck fractures. The secondary goal of this study was to identify factors associated with the maximal possible length of treads in minimally and non-displaced femoral neck fractures.

The study was approved by the Brigham and Women's Hospital Institutional Review Board (Protocol 2018P000705).

2. PATIENTS AND METHODS

2.1 Study Design

We performed a retrospective study of all patients treated at two ACS level 1 trauma centers between April 1, 2004 and December 31, 2017.

2.2 Study Participants

Cases were identified retrospectively by querying the hospital database for patients with femoral neck fracture who received pre-operative computerized tomography (CT) or magnetic resonance imaging (MRI). Inclusion criteria for the study were as follows: (1) Pre-operative CT or MRI imaging and (2) femoral neck fractures. Exclusion criteria were: (1) severely displaced or angulated fracture; (2) pathologic fracture secondary to malignancy or infection; (3) peri-prosthetic fractures; (4) poor imaging documented on final radiology report; and (5) no coronal reformatted images. Baseline characteristics for patient (age, gender, race, height, body mass index (BMI), and mechanism of injury) were recorded. A total of 127 patients met the inclusion criteria and were included in the study (Figure 1).

2.3 Imaging and Measurements

The pre-operative CT and MRI images were reviewed in a standard fashion. Mid-coronal slices of reformatted coronal CT and MRI sequences were used. Fracture lines were identified in the region of the femoral neck and possible trajectories for cannulated lag screws were templated. These trajectories were made to mimic screw paths of an inverted triangle configuration, with screws perpendicular to fracture plane and parallel to femoral neck axis. Care was taken to identify the lesser trochanter to ensure an appropriate simulated start-point for the planned screw trajectory. The distance between the subchondral bone and the fracture line was then measured along both the superior and inferior screw trajectory so that each patient had two screw measurements as seen in Figure 2. This distance from proximal femoral head to fracture line reflected the maximum possible thread-form length on the lag screw without penetrating into the joint or crossing the fracture line. One person performed all radiographic measurements for this study to minimize inter-reader variability. However, inter-reader reliability was performed with 10 randomly selected patients, demonstrating similar estimates.

2.4 Variables

Patient demographics, medical histories, and imaging were abstracted from the electronic medical record. Femoral head and neck fragment lengths were defined in millimeters.

2.5 Statistical Analysis

Categorical variables were compared using a chi square test or Fisher's exact test. Continuous variables, including predicted thread-form length, were analyzed using a Student's t-test (ANOVA). Mann Whitney U test was performed for comparing medians of simulated superior and inferior screw estimates. For all tests, an alpha level less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant. Cases with missing data point(s) were excluded from the analysis for that variable and noted in the data table.

3. RESULTS

Of the 242 patients identified from a review of the hospital databases during the study period, 127 patients met the study inclusion criteria (Figure 1). Of these, 56 patients received preoperative CT imaging while the remaining 71 patients received MRI. Demographic and injury data is presented in Table 2.

The average length of the maximal possible screw thread forms, as measured by distance from sub-chondral bone to fracture along the superior and inferior simulated screw trajectories, was $33.2 \pm 6.67\text{mm}$. Based on our measurements, 90% of cases had estimated thread lengths greater than 26.0mm while 95% of cases had estimates greater than 24.0mm. Figure 3 shows the distribution of estimated thread lengths with the lower quartile at 29.1mm and upper quartile at 37.2mm. The interquartile range was 8.1mm with a median of 32.0mm. Comparison of the simulated superior versus inferior screw trajectories showed a statistically significant difference with relative medians of 31.6mm and 33.0mm respectively ($p = 0.02$).

Concerning secondary outcomes, table 3 presents the distribution of lag screw thread form lengths based on various factors such as age, gender, race, height, and BMI. The estimated lengths of thread forms were significantly longer in males (mean 37.2 ± 7.0) compared to females (mean 31.4 ± 5.7 , $p < 0.001$) and in patients identifying as Hispanic (39.1 ± 9.8 , $p = 0.04$) compared to other races. Height was also positively correlated with longer estimated thread form lengths ($p < 0.001$). The estimated lengths of lag screw thread forms was not associated with age ($p=0.65$) or BMI ($p=0.32$). Linear regression analysis showed that only height was significantly correlated with thread form length ($p = 0.002$).

4. DISCUSSION

Presently, most lag screws are manufactured with two standard thread form lengths, 16mm and 32mm¹² (Table 1). Based on our data, the commonly available tread-form lengths do not appear to optimally treat non-displaced and minimally-displaced femoral neck fractures. While the 32mm length may be used safely in approximately 50% of cases, the 16mm tread is likely too conservative. A tread form length of 26mm would improve screw purchase considerably and would still not cross the fracture line in over 90% of patients. In addition to analyzing the distribution of possible thread form lengths, our study also showed that increased height is associated with longer possible tread lengths. This is most likely due to the correlation between height and bone size^{13,14}.

Based on previous biomechanical studies, stability of fracture fixation is determined largely by compression across fracture surface to transfer load sharing⁹. A larger thread area offers greater purchase, and thus increases compression across fracture plane⁸. As such, for lag screws to offer the maximum purchase within the bone and compression across the fracture line, the thread form lengths should be equal to the distance from the sub-chondral bone of the femoral head to fracture line.

A recent study showed a failure rate of fixation of minimally displaced and non-displaced fractures to be 19%, of which over 40% were due to loss of fixation¹⁵. Our results suggest that a longer thread length of 26 mm may offer better purchase within bone and thus lower this complication rate. Although a RCT from 2009 showed no significant difference in failure rates between patients treated with 16mm versus 32mm¹², sample size calculations suggested over 3000 subjects were needed in each arm to detect subtle differences between groups. Further, patients in this RCT were randomized without consideration of femoral head to fracture line distances. It is unclear how many patients randomized to the longer lag screw had thread forms straddling fracture lines, which may also explain the lack of difference between the two groups. Our study suggests that half of patients with minimally and non-displaced femoral neck fractures have estimated femoral head to fracture line distances of less than 32mm and thus poor candidates for the 32mm lag screw. Depending on which manufacturer and cannulated screw set used, it may be that only the 16mm tread lengths are available for this patient population. Either adding tread length options or increasing the minimum tread length would increase the screw

purchase possible within the femoral head without compromising lag screw technique by crossing the fracture line.

A recent study utilized fully threaded screws to purposefully cross fracture lines during fixation of femoral neck fractures in an attempt to minimize shortening of the femoral neck without compromising fracture healing or screw pull-out¹⁶. Although this may bring into question the significance of not crossing the fracture line when using lag screws for screw fixation of femoral neck fractures, however, the majority of patients treated using this fully threaded screw method (18 of 24) were initially fixed and aligned with traditional lag screw technique, suggesting that it is still important to respect the fracture line in the initial fixation stage¹⁶.

Our study has a number of limitations. It was based only on patients with CT or MRI scans available, regardless of method used in clinical care. CT and MRI were chosen as the imaging modality of choice for their high resolution, which allowed accurate determination of fracture angulation and displacement, as well as accurate radiographic measurements of theoretical thread length. Based on radiology reports, patients received CT or MRI either due to inadequate visualization of femoral neck fracture on initial hip XR or for concomitant abdominal or pelvic pathology. Only patients with minimally angulated and displaced fractures were included to ensure accurate simulated screw paths on radiographic imaging, and to reflect clinical practice as most patients who receive screw fixation have minimally displaced femoral neck fractures. It is possible that this population of patients is in some way different from the typical hip fracture patient. Additionally, our measurements were based on simulated screw trajectories, and there could be some difference between the measurements made and the clinical practice of placing screws. The results of this study demonstrate the need for additional prospective clinical studies measuring maximum thread form length in real time of patients presenting with minimally displaced femoral neck fractures.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it appears that the current thread-length options available are not ideal for the fixation of minimally displaced and minimally angulated femoral neck fractures. Given the common occurrence of these injuries, fracture implants should be designed to optimize purchase within the bone while maintaining the lag screw function of the implants. The addition of a

26mm thread length screw would substantially increase the surface area of the treads making contact within the cancellous bone of the femoral head without crossing the fracture line in the vast majority of patients.

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Table 1Standard thread lengths for large cannulated screws $\geq 6.5\text{mm}$

Major Manufacturer	Standard thread lengths (mm)
DePuy Synthes® Cannulated Screw System	16mm
	32mm
Smith & Nephew® Large Cannulated Screw System**	16mm
	22mm
	32mm
	46mm
Stryker® Asnis III Cannulated Screw System	20mm
	40mm
Zimmer Biomet® 6.5/8.0mm Cannulated Screw System	16mm
	40mm
Zimmer® Magna-FX Cannulated Screw Fixation System	16mm
	32mm

**16 and 32 mm part of 7.0mm Cannulated Screw Set, 22 and 46 mm part of 6.5mm and 8.0mm Cannulated Screw Sets

Table 2

Characteristics of patients with femoral neck fractures

	Overall N = 127
Median age, years (range)	71.9 (76.79)
Gender, %	
Female	68.5%
Male	31.5%
Mean height, cm (SD)*	164.9 ± 11.02
Mean BMI, kg/m ² (SD)**	24.5 ± 5.82
Mechanism of Injury, %	
Fall	79.5%
Trauma	5.5%
Atraumatic	15.0%
Lag screw thread form length, mm (SD)	33.2 ± 6.67

BMI, body mass index; SD, standard deviation

* 16 cases with no height listed in chart near time of injury

** 19 cases with no BMI listed in chart near time of injury

Table 3

Lag screw thread form length

	Overall (n = 127)	Lag screw thread form length (mm $\pm$ SD)	P value
Age, years:			0.65
<55	15.0%	33.6 $\pm$ 6.9	
55-64	15.0%	34.1 $\pm$ 6.5	
65-74	23.6%	33.8 $\pm$ 7.4	
75-84	22.8%	32.6 $\pm$ 7.0	
>85	23.6%	32.5 $\pm$ 5.3	
Gender:			< 0.0001
Female	68.5%	31.4 $\pm$ 5.7	
Male	31.5%	37.2 $\pm$ 7.0	
Race/ethnicity:			0.04
White	85.0%	33.0 $\pm$ 6.6	
Black	4.7%	31.6 $\pm$ 5.0	
Hispanic	3.1%	39.1 $\pm$ 9.8	
Asian	0.8%	28.4 $\pm$ 0.7	
N/A	6.3%	35.3 $\pm$ 5.0	
Height, cm:			< 0.0001
<150	7.1%	30.5 $\pm$ 4.9	
150-159	21.3%	30.6 $\pm$ 6.0	
160-169	26.8%	32.0 $\pm$ 4.7	
170-179	22.8%	35.2 $\pm$ 6.7	
>180	9.4%	39.4 $\pm$ 5.8	
N/A	12.6%	33.7 $\pm$ 8.4	
BMI, kg/m ² :			0.32
<18.5	12.6%	33.0 $\pm$ 5.4	
18.5-24.9	32.3%	32.4 $\pm$ 6.4	
25.0-29.9	32.3%	33.8 $\pm$ 6.4	
>30.0	7.9%	32.0 $\pm$ 3.8	
N/A	15.0%	34.8 $\pm$ 9.1	
Mechanism of Injury:			0.002
Fall*	79.5%	32.9 $\pm$ 6.6	
Trauma	5.5%	39.3 $\pm$ 7.9	
Other**	15.0%	32.6 $\pm$ 5.1	

BMI, body mass index; SD, standard deviation

*Fall: low impact injury, fall from standing

**Other: atraumatic, history of primary metabolic bone disorder, chronic steroid use

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

3A

3B