

Influence of prolonged wearing of unstable shoes on upright standing postural control

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Number of words: 4599

ABSTRACT

Objective: To study the influence of prolonged wearing of unstable shoes on standing postural control in prolonged standing workers.

Methods: The participants were divided into two groups: one wore unstable shoes while the other wore conventional shoes for 8 weeks. Stabilometry parameters related to centre of pressure (CoP), rambling (RM) and trembling (TR) as well as the total agonist/antagonist muscle activity, antagonist co-activation and reciprocal activation were evaluated during upright standing, before and after the 8 week period. In both moments, the subjects were evaluated wearing the unstable shoes and in barefoot.

Results: The unstable shoe condition presented increased CoP displacement related variables and decreased co-activation command compared to barefoot before and after the intervention. The prolonged wearing of unstable shoes led to: (1) reduction of medial-lateral CoP root mean square and area; (2) decreased anteroposterior RM displacement; (3) increased anteroposterior RM mean velocity and mediolateral RM displacement; (4) decreased anteroposterior TR RMS; and (5) increased thigh antagonist co-activation in the unstable shoe condition.

Conclusion: The unstable shoe condition is associated to a higher destabilizing effect that leads to a selection of more efficient and accurate postural commands compared to barefoot. Prolonged wearing of unstable shoes provides increased effectiveness and performance of the postural control system, while wearing of unstable shoes in upright standing, that are reflected by changes in CoP related variables and by a reorganization of postural control commands.

Keywords: Stabilometry; Antagonist co-activation; Reciprocal activation; Postural control performance; Unstable support; Prolonged standing workers.

1. INTRODUCTION

The support surface type has a relevant impact over postural control in humans (Dietz et al., 1980; Gantchev & Dimitrova, 1996; Gavrilenko et al., 1995; Ivanenko et al., 1999). When standing on an unstable support, the new postural requirements lead to postural control reorganisation through increased central drive (Gavrilenko, et al., 1995; Ivanenko, et al., 1999) associated with augmented gamma motoneuron activity leading to higher sensitivity of the muscle spindles (Dietz, et al., 1980; Gorassini et al., 1993; Prochazka, 2010; Ribot-Ciscar et al., 2000), changes in synergies between antagonist and agonist muscles (Dietz, et al., 1980) and increased anticipatory postural control adjustments (Aruin et al., 1998; Gantchev & Dimitrova, 1996; Nardone & Schieppati, 1988; Nouillot et al., 1992). Based on this, it can be argued that, depending on the degree, the instability provided by the unstable support condition would have positive effects over the postural control. Despite this possibility, the effect of unstable support conditions has been explored mainly at the immediate level or in balance training exercises. Considering the adaptation of the central nervous system (CNS) in response to changing task and environment demands (Shumway-Cook & Woolacott, 2007), further investigation is required regarding the long-term influence of changes in afferent information during daily activities that could be beneficial to postural control. Recently, manufacturers have introduced new shoe designs to feature unstable conditions (Masai Barefoot Technology, MBT, USA (Figure 1)) during daily activities to induce a neuromuscular training stimuli to improve postural control (Hu & Woollacott, 1994), and generate structural and functional adaptations in the neuromuscular system (Hakkinen et al., 1996). However, divergence exists as to the benefits from wearing this kind of shoes on postural control. Previous research has demonstrated that wearing this kind of unstable shoes regularly leads to changes in muscle activity level, mainly at the ankle joint, during upright standing (Sousa et al., 2012) and to decreased centre of pressure (CoP) excursion in young subjects (Landry et al., 2010); although no changes have been observed in the mean velocity of the CoP in mid-aged women (Ramstrand et al., 2010), neither in the CoP excursion in one-leg stance in young subjects (Turbanski et al., 2011). This divergence

could result from the few parameters analysed, as a larger set of measures is required to detect differences in postural control (Pavol, 2005).

Upright stance is associated with a process of continuous small body deviations countered by corrective torques, generating a pattern known as spontaneous body sway. Involving a complex sensorimotor control system, upright postural control can be evaluated based on measurements of the body segment displacement, muscle activity and displacement and motion patterns of the centre of mass (CoM) and CoP (Balasubramaniam & Wing, 2002).

From a biomechanical perspective, a number of parameters derived from the CoP migration have been often used to characterise postural control and to evaluate postural performance (Bennell & Goldie, 1994; Collins & De Luca, 1993; Kinzey et al., 1997; Maurer & Peterka, 2005). This is because the CoP migration represents the summed up effect of mechanical muscle properties and of a number of different neuromuscular components whose characteristics are strongly dependent on the main inputs that control postural stability (Baratto et al., 2002; Maurer & Peterka, 2005; Winter, 1995b). However, CoP measures only represent the control variable acting to compensate the CoM displacement (the controlled variable) (Morasso et al., 1999). The importance of CoM measurements in association with CoP measurements is because the difference between the two variables is proportional to the horizontal acceleration of the CoM representing the “error” signal in the balance control system (Winter, 1995b). According to Zatsiorsky and Duarte, 1999, the nature of postural sway is the result of a moving reference point (rambling, RM). This moving point is related to the supraspinal process and constitutes a reference about which the body oscillates (trembling, TR) through the action of spinal reflexes and changes in the intrinsic mechanical properties of muscles and joints (Zatsiorsky & Duarte, 1999). The decomposition technique of CoP time series proposed by authors to assess RM and TR has been demonstrated to provide a very good estimate for both components (Lafond et al., 2004). However, to the best of our knowledge, no previous study addressed the influence of wearing unstable shoes in CoP and CoM interrelation or in muscle synergies during quiet standing. Does wearing unstable shoes lead to a higher performance and effectiveness of upright standing postural control?

Considering the aforementioned, the main purpose of this study was to analyse the influence of long-term wearing of unstable shoes in upright standing postural control in prolonged standing workers. More explicitly, the purposes were to evaluate the effect of wearing unstable shoes on: 1) CoP displacement pattern, 2) CoP and CoM inter-relation through RM and TR components, 3) total agonist and antagonist muscle activity, and 4) agonist-antagonist muscle relation. Based on recent studies which have demonstrated that wearing unstable shoes improves the performance of postural control responses to external perturbations (Sousa et al., 2013a; Sousa et al., 2013b), it can be hypothesised that the long-term wearing of unstable shoes would lead to higher performance and effectiveness of upright standing postural control, reflected by decreased CoP displacement, area and velocity (Bennell & Goldie, 1994; Kinzey, et al., 1997; Norris et al., 2005) and dispersion (Prieto et al., 1996), respectively. Also, considering that the postural control system relies more strongly on co-activation commands at the beginning of learning (Feldman, 1980a; Flash, 1987; Serres & Milner, 1991), when the internal models are poor, and on reciprocal activation commands as the learning proceeds (Imamizu et al., 2000; Osu et al., 2002), increased reciprocal activation and decreased antagonist co-activation after prolonged wearing of unstable shoes can be hypothesised. Finally, because these postural control adaptation strategies lead to reduced noise and increased accuracy (Lacquaniti et al., 1993), a decreased postural control system error, demonstrated through the CoM and CoP relation (Winter, 1995a) (RM and TR (Zatsiorsky & Duarte, 2000)) can also be expected. The design of the unstable footwear used in this study (MBT) is based on observations of the Masai tribe, who are not accustomed to wearing shoes. This design recreates natural uneven walking surfaces to reduce problems caused by today's rigid soled shoes and hard ground. This assumption raises the question: are postural control variables while wearing unstable shoes similar to that obtained under barefoot conditions? Based on this, values obtained while wearing the unstable shoes were compared to reference values obtained in barefoot condition. Similar values of CoP related variables would be expected between barefoot and unstable shoe conditions, before and after prolonged use of the shoes, as no differences were previously demonstrated during compensatory postural adjustments in response to an external perturbation (Sousa et al., 2013a;

Sousa et al., 2013b). Also, the results obtained in these studies support the hypothesis of a decreased co-activation command in the unstable shoe condition compared to barefoot.

2. METHODS

2.1 Subjects

The study included healthy female participants whose professional occupation requires prolonged standing positions (hairdressers) that were divided into two groups: 1) the experimental group included 14 individuals (age = 34.6 ± 7.7 years, height = 1.59 ± 0.06 m, weight = 65.3 ± 9.6 kg; mean \pm SD), and 2) the control group included 16 individuals (age = 34.9 ± 8.0 years, height = 1.62 ± 0.06 m, weight = 61.1 ± 6.3 Kg; mean \pm SD). Possible candidates with recent osteoarticular and musculotendinous injury or surgery of lower extremities, background and signs of neurological dysfunction or under medication that could affect motor performance and balance were excluded, as well as individuals who had used unstable footwear (specifically, Masai Barefoot Technology) prior to the study.

The study was conducted according to the involved Institutions' ethical norms and conformed to the Declaration of Helsinki, being informed consent obtained from all participants.

2.2 Instrumentation

The electromyographic (EMG) activity of the gastrocnemius medialis (GM), tibialis anterior (TA), rectus femoris (RF) and biceps femoris (BF) muscles was monitored using the *MP 150 Workstation* model from *Biopac Systems, Inc. (USA)*, bipolar steel surface electrodes, spaced 20 mm apart, and a ground electrode (*Biopac Systems, Inc.*). The EMG signal was collected at 1000 Hz, pre-amplified at the electrode site and then fed into a differential amplifier with adjustable gain setting (12-500 Hz; Common Mode Rejection Ratio (CMRR): 95 dB at 50 Hz and input impedance of 100 M Ω). The gain range used was equal to 1000. The electrodes were placed at the centre of the muscle belly of GM, TA, RF and BF (Table 1) after the skin was shaved, cleaned with alcohol and scrubbed to reduce impedance to at least 5000 Ω , measured through an Electrode Impedance

Checker (Noraxon USA, Inc.). Stabilometry parameters in the horizontal plane and along the anteroposterior orthogonal axes (Winter et al., 1998) were obtained using a force plate, model FP4060-10 from Bertec Corporation (USA), connected to a Bertec AM 6300 amplifier, with default gains and a 1000 Hz sampling rate. The amplifier was connected to a Biopac 16 bit analogical-digital converter.

2.3 Procedures

2.3.1 Data collection

In the experimental group, the EMG and stabilometric data were acquired at: (1) prior to using the unstable shoes and (2) after wearing them for a period of 8 weeks. The subjects in the control group were also assessed at two moments separated by 8 weeks where they were tested barefoot and on the unstable footwear. However, in the 8-week period the control group used their own regular footwear (1.5 cm heel). In both groups and in all assessments, the variables evaluated were monitored under two randomised conditions: (1) upright barefoot standing and (2) upright standing wearing the unstable shoes (Figure 1). The EMG measurements were performed on the dominant limb, determined by asking participants to kick a ball (all participants were right leg dominant). Before the data acquisition, all subjects underwent an instruction session by a qualified instructor who explained how to use the unstable shoe, followed by approximately 10 minutes of walking, until the instructor felt they walked properly and were comfortable using the shoes (Nigg et al., 2006).

The data acquisition was initiated 3 seconds after starting the testing procedure and was done in a total of 3 trials (Pinsault & Vuillerme, 2009; Ruhe et al., 2010). All individuals were asked to stand as still as possible (Zok et al., 2008), with the support base aligned at shoulder width, keeping their arms by their sides and to focus on a target 2 meters away and at eye level during 30 seconds (Le Clair & Riach, 1996). Rest periods of 60 seconds were provided between trials, during which the subjects sat down while maintaining the foot position (Kitabayashi et al., 2003).

After the upright standing measurements and a warm-up consisting of 3 submaximal isometric contractions (Lehman & McGill, 1999), the EMG maximal isometric contraction (MIC) was acquired for signal normalisation. For the TA and GM, the ankle was placed in neutral position, and for the BF and RF, the knee was at 90°. All participants were asked to perform 3 trials of MIC for dorsiflexion, plantar flexion, knee flexion and knee extension, respectively, under resistance during 5 seconds, with a 60 seconds rest between trials (Brown & Weir, 2001). The signals collected within the first and last seconds were discarded.

Following an initial evaluation, a pair of the unstable shoes was given to each subject in the experimental group, being the subjects instructed to wear them as much as possible at least 8 hours a day, 5 days a week (working hours), for 8 weeks, to obtain training effects (Nigg, et al., 2006; Ramstrand et al., 2008; Ramstrand, et al., 2010; Romkes et al., 2006). All participants from the experimental group received a guide on how to use the shoes, and the participants in the control group were told to continue their normal activities and not begin any new exercise regime. The responsible for each company group guaranteed the adherence of the participants.

2.3.2 Data processing

i) Electromyography

The raw EMG signal was band-pass filtered (20-450 Hz) and the root mean square (RMS) was calculated. The EMG of each muscle was normalised to the corresponding value obtained during MIC (EMGnorm). Reciprocal activation and antagonist co-activation were calculated for joint level (i.e., for muscles that span one joint) and muscle group level (group of muscles that span multiple joints). For the joint level, the muscles acting on the ankle (TA/GM pair) and on the knee (RF/(GM + BF) pair) were considered. For the muscle group level, the sum of the EMGnorm of all the dorsal (GM and BF) and all the ventral (TA and RF) postural muscles was adopted.

The antagonist co-activation at joint level and at muscle group level were calculated using the following equations (Kellis et al., 2003):

a) Antagonist co-activation at the joint level:

$$\text{Antagonist co-activation}_{TA/GM \text{ pair}} = \frac{EMG_{norm_{TA}}}{EMG_{norm_{GM}} + EMG_{norm_{TA}}} \times 100, \quad (1)$$

$$\text{Antagonist co-activation}_{RF/(BF+GM) \text{ pair}} = \frac{EMG_{norm_{RF}}}{EMG_{norm_{(BF+GM)}} + EMG_{norm_{RF}}} \times 100. \quad (2)$$

b) Antagonist co-activation at the muscle group level:

$$\text{Antagonist co-activation}_{ventral/dorsal \text{ pair}} = \frac{EMG_{norm_{(TA+RF)}}}{EMG_{norm_{(GM+BF)}} + EMG_{norm_{(TA+RF)}}} \times 100. \quad (3)$$

This approach provides an estimate of the relative activation of the pair of muscles, as well as the magnitude of the co-activation.

The reciprocal activation at joint and muscle group levels was calculated using the following equations (Slijper & Latash, 2004):

a) Reciprocal activation at the joint level:

$$\text{Reciprocal activation}_{TA/GM \text{ pair}} = EMG_{norm_{GM}} - EMG_{norm_{TA}}, \quad (4)$$

$$\text{Reciprocal activation}_{RF/(BF+GM) \text{ pair}} = EMG_{norm_{(BF+GM)}} - EMG_{norm_{RF}}. \quad (5)$$

b) Reciprocal activation at the muscle group level:

$$\text{Reciprocal activation}_{ventral/dorsal \text{ pair}} = EMG_{norm_{(GM+BF)}} - EMG_{norm_{(TA+RF)}}. \quad (6)$$

ii) Stabilometry

A fourth-order, zero phase-lag, low-pass Butterworth filter with a cut-off frequency of 10 Hz (Ruhe, et al., 2010) was applied to all the CoP displacement time series. The peak-to-peak amplitude ($P-P$), mean velocity (MV), which was defined as the total CoP displacement divided by the total period, and dispersion time series estimated by RMS were calculated. A 95% confidence ellipse for each trial was estimated to enclose approximately 95% of the CoP motion points in the 2D domain. These parameters were selected as they were demonstrated to be sensitive to postural performance and efficiency (Rocchi et al., 2004).

The RM and TR displacement components were obtained according to the method proposed in (Zatsiorsky & Duarte, 1999). In brief, the RM component expresses the movement of a moving reference point (an attractor point), with respect to which the balance of the body is maintained

instantly. To obtain this component, the particular moments when the horizontal forces (shear forces measured by the force plate) changed its signs were selected, and the instants when the horizontal forces were equal to zero were estimated by linear interpolation. The CoP positions at these instants (instant equilibrium points, IEP) were determined. To obtain an estimate of the RM trajectory, the IEP discrete positions were interpolated by cubic spline functions with gravity line. The difference between the RM and CoP trajectories was defined as the TR component. The TR component reflects the oscillation of the body around the reference point. From the RM and TR time series, the *RMS*, *area*, *MV* and *P-P* variation were calculated. The data analysis was performed using the Matlab software (*MathWorks, USA*).

2.4 Statistics

The statistical analysis was processed using *Statistic Package Social Science (SPSS)* from *IBM Company (USA)*. The sample was characterised by descriptive statistics. To evaluate if wearing unstable shoes lead to higher performance and effectiveness of standing postural control, the main effect and interactions between the effects of the condition (unstable shoe vs barefoot), the intervention period and the group (experimental vs control), in total agonist and antagonist muscle activity, antagonist co-activation and reciprocal activation values and stabilometric data, were analysed according to the repeated-measures ANOVA. Also, the magnitude of the intervention effects was assessed through the Cohen's *d* for the electromyographic and stabilometric data (Cook, 2008). To verify if postural control variables while wearing unstable shoes are similar to that obtained under barefoot conditions, the main effect of the condition (unstable shoe vs barefoot) was analysed according the repeated-measures ANOVA

3. RESULTS

To investigate the effect of wearing the unstable shoes on the postural control, the values of stabilometry and of agonist and antagonist relation in the experimental group were compared against the reference values obtained in: 1) the control group; 2) the barefoot condition of the

experimental group; and 3) the first evaluation of the experimental group in the unstable shoe condition.

No differences between the experimental and control groups were found at the first time point, before the intervention of the experimental group, in the CoP related variables in barefoot ($p>0.194$) and in unstable shoe conditions ($p>0.117$). Also, no differences were observed in the postural commands in barefoot ($p>0.172$) and unstable shoe conditions ($p>0.118$).

3.1 Does wearing unstable shoes lead to a higher performance and effectiveness of upright standing postural control?

CoP displacement variables

A significant interaction between the effects of the condition (unstable shoe vs barefoot), the training period and the group (experimental vs control) was observed in the CoP *area* ($F(1,27)=8.296$, $p=0.01$) and in the medial-lateral CoP *RMS* ($F(1,27)=4.376$, $p=0.046$), Figure 2. The experimental group presented higher decrease of the CoP *area* and decrease medial-lateral CoP *RMS* after wearing the unstable shoes for 8 weeks in the unstable shoe condition (Tables 2-3 and Figure 3). The control group presented an increase of the medial-lateral CoP *RMS* in the second evaluation. No significant main effects and 2-way interactions were observed for the CoP variables. A large strength in the intervention effect was obtained for the reduction of the medial-lateral CoP *RMS* (Cohen's $d=0.98$) in the unstable shoe condition after 8 weeks of wearing the unstable shoes.

RM related variables

A significant interaction between the effects of condition (unstable shoe vs barefoot), the training period and the group (experimental vs control) was observed for the anteroposterior RM *P-P* ($F(1,27)=8.414$, $p=0.007$) and *MV* ($F(1,27)=4.641$, $p=0.040$), Figure 2. The experimental group presented decreased anteroposterior RM *P-P* and increased anteroposterior RM *MV* while wearing the unstable shoes after the training period, when compared to the first evaluation, the barefoot condition and the control group (Table 2 and Figure 3). A large strength in the intervention effect

was obtained in reducing the anteroposterior RM *P-P* (Cohen's $d=0.9$) in the experimental group in the unstable shoe condition. A significant main effect of the group ($F(1,27)=17.547$, $p<0.001$) and the training period ($F(1,27)=21.799$, $p<0.001$) was also observed in the medial-lateral RM *P-P*. After training, the experimental group presented increased medial-lateral RM *P-P* when compared to the first evaluation, while the control group presented decreased of medial-lateral RM *P-P* in the second evaluation compared to the first (Table 3 and Figure 3). No statistically significant 2-way interactions were observed for the RM variables.

TR related variables

A significant interaction between the effects of condition (unstable shoe vs barefoot), the training period and the group (experimental vs control) was observed for the anterior-posterior TR *RMS* component ($F(1,27)=8.069$, $p=0.001$). A significant main effect was observed for the training period ($F(1,27)=4.309$, $p=0.048$) (Figure 2). The experimental group presented decreased anteroposterior TR *RMS* after training when compared to the first evaluation, while the control group presented increase values for this variable (Table 2). Also, the experimental group presented an increase of anterior-posterior TR *RMS* from the first to the second evaluation in the barefoot condition (Figure 2).

Postural commands

A significant interaction between the effects of condition (unstable shoe vs barefoot), the training period and the group (experimental vs control) was observed for the thigh antagonist co-activation ($F(1,27)=6.414$, $p=0.012$) (Figure 2). No significant main effects and 2-way interactions were observed. A large strength in the intervention effect was obtained through increased thigh antagonist co-activation (Cohen's $d=0.8$) in the experimental group. The experimental group presented increased thigh antagonist co-activation while wearing the unstable shoes after the training period, when compared to the first evaluation, the barefoot condition and the control group (Table 4 and Figure 3).

3.2 Are postural control variables while wearing unstable shoes similar to that obtained under barefoot conditions?

CoP displacement related variables

There was a significant main effect of the unstable shoe condition vs barefoot condition on the anteroposterior CoP *MV* ($F(1,27)=6.684$, $p=0.015$), anteroposterior ($F(1,27)=37.694$, $p<0.001$) and medial-lateral ($F(1,27)=83.820$, $p<0.001$) CoP *RMS* and *area* ($F(1,27)=40.175$, $p<0.001$). Generally, higher values were obtained while wearing the unstable shoes when compared to the ones obtained in the barefoot condition in first and second evaluations (Tables 2-3 and Figure 3).

RM related variables

A significant main effect of the unstable shoe condition vs barefoot condition was observed in the RM *P-P* and *RMS* in anteroposterior ($F(1,27)=5.073$, $p=0.033$), ($F(1,27)=21.667$, $p<0.001$, respectively) and medial-lateral ($F(1,27)=137.664$, $p<0.001$), ($F(1,27)=11.084$, $p=0.003$, respectively) directions, and in the RM *area* ($F(1,27)=102.5334$, $p<0.001$). Generally, lower values of anteroposterior RM *P-P* and *RMS* were obtained in the unstable shoe condition when compared to the barefoot condition, while higher values of medial-lateral RM *P-P*, RM *RMS* and RM *area* were obtained in the unstable shoe condition when compared to the barefoot condition, in both evaluations (Tables 2-3 and Figure 3).

TR related variables

A significant main effect on the TR component was observed for the condition (barefoot vs unstable shoe), for the anteroposterior TR *RMS* ($F(1,27)=18.704$, $p<0.001$), medial-lateral TR *RMS* ($F(1,27)=6.804$, $p=0.015$) and TR *area* ($F(1,27)=37.721$, $p<0.001$). Both groups presented increased TR *RMS* and *area* in the unstable shoe condition compared to the barefoot condition in both evaluations (Tables 2-3 and Figure 3).

Postural commands

A significant main effect of condition (barefoot vs unstable shoe) was observed in the thigh co-activation ($F(1,28)=21.038$, $p<0.001$) and reciprocal activation ($F(1,28)=18.23$, $p<0.001$), in leg co-activation ($F(1,28)=8.131$, $p=0.008$) and reciprocal activation ($F(1,28)=22.292$, $p<0.001$), and in global antagonist co-activation ($F(1,28)=12.940$, $p=0.001$) and total agonist activity ($F(1,28)=25.711$, $p<0.001$). Decreased antagonist co-activation and increased reciprocal activation and total agonist activity were observed in the unstable shoe condition when compared to the barefoot condition in both evaluations (Table 4 and Figure 3).

4. DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to evaluate the effect of prolonged wearing of unstable shoes on postural control components. The results obtained confirm our hypothesis that prolonged wearing of unstable shoes increases postural control performance, demonstrated by a decrease of the most representative CoP displacement parameters (Collins & De Luca, 1993; Maurer & Peterka, 2005; Pavol, 2005; Rocchi, et al., 2004), and decreased postural control system error, demonstrated by the adaptation of the RM and TR components (Zatsiorsky & Duarte, 2000), more marked in the unstable shoe condition. However, our results failed in demonstrating a decreased co-activation command and increased reciprocal activation command as a training effect. Also, upright standing while wearing the unstable shoes is more demanding from a postural control perspective than standing barefoot, even after prolonged wearing of the shoes. This higher demand was reflected by increased CoP related variables while wearing unstable shoe compared to barefoot, but also by a selection of more challenging postural commands by the postural control system.

Wearing of the unstable shoes led to a higher performance and effectiveness of upright standing postural control in the unstable shoe condition

Unstable shoes have been reported as promoters of increased instability (Nigg, et al., 2006). However, training effects over postural control system resulting from prolonged wearing of unstable shoes have not been found (Ramstrand, et al., 2010; Turbanski, et al., 2011). Our results demonstrate a reduction of the CoP *area* and of the medial-lateral CoP *RMS* in unstable shoe

condition after prolonged wearing of the shoes, revealing increased efficiency and effectiveness of the postural control system (Bennell & Goldie, 1994; Murray et al., 1975; Prieto, et al., 1996; van Wegen et al., 2002).

Training effects from wearing the unstable shoes were also evident in the RM parameter. The reduction of the $P-P$ of RM trajectory in the anteroposterior direction reflects a higher efficiency of the postural control system (Bennell & Goldie, 1994; Kinzey, et al., 1997; Norris, et al., 2005; Prieto, et al., 1996) related to supraspinal processes that define an instantaneous point about which the body is stabilised (Zatsiorsky & Duarte, 1999, 2000). The increased MV of the RM component could be related to a reweighted combination of reciprocal activation and co-activation commands (Drew & Rossignol, 1987; Feldman, 1980a, 1980b; Feldman & Levin, 1995; Lacquaniti, 1992; Lacquaniti et al., 1991; Levin et al., 1992). Indeed, the results of this study reveal that prolonged wearing of the unstable shoes led to a large effect in the increase of thigh antagonist co-activation. A transfer of postural control synergy for the thigh has been demonstrated in compensatory responses after a 8 weeks period of wearing unstable shoes (Sousa et al., 2014) and has been reported as more beneficial to optimise postural stability (Day et al., 1993; Horak et al., 1990; Kuo, 1993; Runge et al., 1999; Yang et al., 1990). This association is corroborated not only by the decrease of the most representative CoP displacement parameters and RM $P-P$, but also by decreased anterior-posterior TR RMS . Changes in the TR RMS indicate an increased effectiveness provided by an adaptation of spinal reflexes and changes in the intrinsic mechanical properties of muscles and joints (Zatsiorsky & Duarte, 1999).

Standing with unstable shoes is more demanding in terms of postural control than standing barefoot

The design of the unstable footwear used in this study (MBT) is based on observations of the Masai tribe, who are not accustomed to wearing shoes. This design recreates natural uneven surfaces to reduce problems caused by today's rigid soled shoes and hard ground. In spite of the adaptations aforementioned after prolonged wearing of the unstable shoes, the total agonist activity

and CoP displacement related variables are still higher than in barefoot condition (Figure 2), suggesting that the destabilising effect of the unstable shoes remains even after the extended use of the shoes. Based on the evidence that unstable support surfaces lead to increased proprioceptive acuity provided by agonist muscles (Gandevia et al., 1992) as a result of a higher fusimotor drive (Gorassini, et al., 1993; Gurfinkel et al., 1992; Ribot-Ciscar et al., 2009), it can be argued that the permanence of a higher destabilizing effect promoted by the unstable shoes adopted are responsible for higher performance of the postural control system. Also, the results of the present study indicate that, in both pre- and post-training, wearing unstable shoes leads the postural control system to rely more on reciprocal activation than on co-activation to compensate for the decreased stability compared to barefoot. This has been demonstrated to be more efficient and accurate, but also more challenging for the postural control system (Aruin & Almeida, 1997; Friedli et al., 1984; Garland et al., 1997; Hogan, 1984; Hong et al., 1994; Latash et al., 1995; Massion et al., 1999), and it has been observed also in compensatory postural adjustments in response to an external perturbation (Sousa, et al., 2013a; Sousa, et al., 2014). These findings demonstrate that wearing unstable shoes is more demanding in terms of postural control than barefoot, but lead to a higher efficiency and accuracy in postural commands. This postural control advantage is also observed even after prolonged use of unstable shoes.

Wearing unstable shoes can be a beneficial ergonomic intervention for prolonged standing workers

It should be noted that the results presented were obtained from participants that work in prolonged standing positions. It has been demonstrated that subjects spending at least 50% of the working time in a standing position are in risk for developing neuromusculoskeletal impairments and venous insufficiency (Krijnen et al., 1998; Macfarlane et al., 1997; Tomei et al., 1999). The static contraction of lower back and legs results in diminished function of the calf muscle, muscle fatigue, discomfort and even low back pain (Krijnen, et al., 1998). Discomfort or subjective fatigue can be linked to psychological fatigue and has been recognised as a factor in the decline of alertness, mental concentration, and motivation (Simonson & Weiser, 1976). Commonly chosen ergonomic

intervention methods to reduce pain and discomfort associated with prolonged standing are the alteration of the flooring on which workers stand, and the use of in-soles in the footwear (King, 2002), as one of the strategies is to make the body sway naturally and imperceptibly. The results of the present study encourage the use of unstable shoes as a beneficial ergonomic intervention, since they demonstrate that the instability provided by wearing the shoes leads to a reorganisation of postural control that result in increased performance and effectiveness during upright standing. This reorganisation of upright standing postural control is accompanied by increased calf muscle activity, improving venous return (Sousa, et al., 2012). However, studies on the influence of wearing unstable shoes on subjective rating of fatigue and discomfort while standing are demanded to support our hypothesis.

5. CONCLUSION

Our results demonstrate that wearing unstable shoes is more demanding in terms of postural control than barefoot and consequently, could be used to reduce problems caused by today's rigid soled shoes and hard ground. The prolonged exposure to this postural challenge led to higher effectiveness and performance of the postural control system, while wearing unstable shoes in upright standing, that are reflected by changes in CoP related variables and by a reorganization of postural control commands.

This study is the first demonstrating comprehensively that wearing unstable shoes during prolonged standing work leads to positive effects over standing postural control. Therefore, the results are innovative and provide valuable information for the design of shoes that can diminish the negative effects of prolonged standing in the musculoskeletal system and contribute for better occupational health.

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TABLE CAPTIONS

Table 1: Anatomical references to electrode placement. (Electrode locations were confirmed by palpation of the muscular belly with the subject in the test position, being the electrodes placed on the most prominent area.)

Table 2: Mean \pm standard deviation values of stabilometry parameters obtained in the barefoot and in the unstable shoe conditions for the AP direction before (1) and after (2) 8 weeks of wearing unstable shoes (WUS) in the experimental group, and before (1) and after (2) the same period by the control group.

Table 3: Mean \pm standard deviation values of stabilometry parameters obtained in the barefoot and in the unstable shoe conditions for the ML direction and area before (1) and after (2) 8 weeks of wearing unstable shoes (WUS) in the experimental group, and before (1) and after (2) the same period by the control group.

Table 4: Mean \pm standard deviation values of total agonist and antagonist activity, antagonist co-activation (*C*) and reciprocal activation (*R*) at thigh, leg and muscle group levels obtained in the barefoot and in the unstable shoe conditions before (1) and after (2) 8 weeks of wearing unstable shoes (WUS) in the experimental group, and before (1) and after (2) the same period by the control group.

FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: Unstable shoe model used in this study: The MBT shoe has a rounded sole in the antero-posterior direction, thus providing an unstable base.

Figure 2: Main effects of prolonged wearing unstable shoes on postural control variables. (Black symbols represent values obtained in unstable shoe condition while grey symbols represent values obtained in barefoot condition. Only the results related to interactions and main effects statistically significant are represented.)

Figure 3: Effects of prolonged wearing of unstable shoes on upright standing CoP displacement related variables while wearing unstable shoes (A); differences obtained between measures performed in unstable shoe and barefoot conditions in both groups before and after the 8 weeks period (B).