Efficacy and safety of Intra-articular Injections with Hyaluronic Acid in the treatment of osteoarthritis: Protocol for a meta-analysis of randomised placebo-controlled trials

Henriette Bahrt1,2, Mette Johansen1,2, Roy D. Altman3, Else M. Bartels1, Carsten B. Juhl2,4, Hans Lund2,5, Henning Bliddal1, and Robin Christensen1,2
1: Musculoskeletal Statistics Unit, The Parker Institute, Dept. Rheum., Copenhagen University Hospital, Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg, Copenhagen, Denmark.
2: Institute of Sports Science and Clinical Biomechanics, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark.
3: UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, LA, USA
4: Department of Physiotherapy, Copenhagen University Hospital, Gentofte, 2900 Hellerup, Denmark
5: Høgskolen i Bergen, Bergen, Norge.

Correspondence to:
Robin Christensen, BSc, MSc, PhD; senior biostatistician
Head of Musculoskeletal Statistics Unit,
The Parker Institute, Department of Rheumatology,
Copenhagen University Hospital, Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg,
Nordre Fasanvej 57
DK-2000 Copenhagen F
Denmark
Phone: (+45) 3816 4165
Fax: (+45) 3816 4159
E-mail: Robin.Christensen@frh.regionh.dk

Keywords: osteoarthritis, meta-analysis, Hyaluronic Acid

Word count (excl. title page, abstract and references): 23.981 excl spaces
ABSTRACT

Introduction: Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common musculoskeletal condition and is a major cause of pain, disability and loss of quality of life. Intraarticular injections of hyaluronic acid (HA) are widely used in the management of osteoarthritis when other treatments as NSAID come to term or have to severe adverse events. The rationale of intra-articular HA injection is to restore the viscosity of the synovial fluid. There are divergent opinions of effect and possible adverse events of HA. Therefore we will provide a systematic review with meta-analysis of the efficacy and safety of viscosupplementation with hyaluronic acid.

Methods and analysis: A systematic review with meta-analysis of randomised or quasi-randomised, controlled trials of viscosupplementation with HA (vs. sham or with non-intervention control) will be considered eligible for inclusion in the meta-analysis. Changes in pain and serious adverse events will be primary endpoint and secondary endpoints will be changes in function and discontinuation due to adverse events. Electronic searches will be performed in MEDLINE, EMBASE, Web of Science and The Cochrane Library, along with manually searches of reference list of specialist journals and conference proceedings. Furthermore unpublished trials will be searched in clinicaltrials.gov and clinicaltrialregister.eu. The primary meta-analysis will be performed using random effects models owing to expected intertrial heterogeneity. Dichotomous data will be analysed using risk difference and continuous data using weighted mean differences, both with 95% CIs.

Ethics and dissemination: The study will evaluate the potential effect and adverse events of viscosupplementation with hyaluronic acid to the clinical management of patients with Osteoarthritis.

Results: The study will be disseminated by peer-review publication.

Protocol registration: PROSPERO CRD42014007284.
INTRODUCTION

Description of the condition
Musculoskeletal conditions are one of the most common causes of severe long-term pain and impaired physical function. These conditions are diverse (1).
Osteoarthritis (OA) is the most common musculoskeletal condition and is a major cause of pain, disability and loss of quality of life. The prevalence of OA increases with age due to the irreversibility of the condition, with approximately 9.6% of men and 18.0% of women aged ≥60 years having symptomatic osteoarthritis (1). Obesity, injuries in the joint, previous surgery and occupational bending and lifting are among risk factors for OA (1-3).

OA most commonly affects knees, hips, hands and spine (2). The greatest population impact is seen in lower limb disabilities (4). OA affects all structures in the joint, with loss of articular cartilage within synovial joints, leading to hypertrophy of bone, capsular thickening and changes in the synovial fluid. OA is clinically characterized by joint pain, weakness of periarticular muscles, limitation in movement, crepitus, tenderness, effusions and local inflammation (2, 3).

Management of osteoarthritis
Currently OA treatment aims to relieve pain symptoms in different ways (5). The available treatments can roughly be categorized in non-pharmacological intervention, pharmacological treatment, invasive/surgical intervention (including intra-articular injections, lavage and arthroplasty) and complementary alternative management (2). OA is to a great extent treated with analgesics including non-steroid anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). Unfortunately these treatments are not effective for all patients and have well-known adverse events (5). For patients where pain is not being alleviated by the NSAIDs (6), intra-articular injection, e.g. corticosteroid, is taken into consideration. This is by some considered an effective treatment with some characteristic adverse effects (3).

Hyaluronic Acid (HA) consists of natural high-viscosity mucopolysaccharides with alternating beta (1-3) glucuronide and beta (1-4) glucosamine bonds. HA is naturally occurring in synovial fluid acting as a lubricant and shock absorber, and the elastoviscosity of the synovial fluid diminishes in the development of OA (7, 8).
Viscosupplementation with HA is believed to be an effective therapeutic modality where the synovial fluid is replaced or supplemented by a fluid with higher viscosity than the one present (7). HA is injected intra-articularly to improve the biomechanical function of the joint. It is a natural component of the synovial fluid and an important contributor to the joint health. In OA there is a
decrease in both the concentration and the molecular weight of HA, as well as a reduction of the viscosity of the synovial fluid. The rationale of intra-articular HA injection is to restore the viscosity of the synovial fluid (7-9). There are divergent opinions of effect and possible adverse events of HA (9).

**Meta-Analyses evaluating viscosupplementation**

In order to promote evidence-based research (10-13), we initially explored the research field on viscosupplementation in OA, by including a quasi systematic approach to locate any systematic reviews available in Medline via PubMed from dates 01.10.2013 using a filter previously described (5) combined (=AND) with various terms for viscosupplementation:


- Osteoarthritis[mh] OR Osteoarthritis[ti]


Two individual reviewers searched Medline via Pubmed without language restrictions. Last search was carried out on 1 October 2013. Two reviewers evaluated the reports independently for eligibility. Disagreement was resolved by consensus or with third reviewer RC.

From this search we identified 26 references and considered 16 to be potentially eligible, from these 14 systematic reviews/meta-analyses comparing viscosupplementation with placebo or an active control group for the treatment of OA was selected. Furthermore 1 systematic review comparing viscosupplementation with placebo or an active control group for the treatment of OA was identified by specialist in the field.

**Methodological quality of systematic reviews and quality of the evidence**

Several tools have been created to assess systematic review quality (14-17). We applied the measurement tool for assessing the methodological quality of systematic reviews known as the AMSTAR tool, applying a yes/no/can't answer/not applicable score to eleven relevant domains of review methodology.

*Table 1* illustrates the score for each domain and the evaluated AMSTAR score.

*Table 2* illustrates narratively the conclusions in each of the reviews and the total AMSTAR score.
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<td>Miller et al. 2013</td>
<td>US-Approved Intra-Articular Hyaluronic Acid Injections are Safe and Effective in Patients with Knee OA: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis</td>
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<td>We conducted the first systematic review and meta-analysis of US-approved HA products on knee OA symptoms. Overall, we found that intra-articular injection of US-approved HA products is safe and effective in patients with knee OA.</td>
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<td>Chua et al. 2013</td>
<td>Effectiveness of intra-articular hyaluronic acid for acute osteoarthritis treatment: a systematic review and meta-analysis</td>
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<td>We found that intra-articular HA administration was significantly more effective at reducing knee pain scores. We concluded that HA is a viable treatment option for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Raje et al. 2012</td>
<td>Visco-supplementation for relief of arthritis of the knee: a systematic review and meta-analysis</td>
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<td>We concluded that visco-supplementation with glucosamine and chondroitin is an effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Cohen et al. 2002</td>
<td>Hyaluronic acid in the treatment of knee osteoarthritis: a systematic review and meta-analysis with emphasis on the efficacy of different products</td>
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<td>In the future, it will be important to determine the exact mechanism of action of glucosamine and chondroitin and to compare these with other treatment options.</td>
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<td>Cohen et al. 2013</td>
<td>Hyaluronic Acid for the Treatment of Osteoarthritis in All Joints</td>
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<td>More performing a systematic review, using a rigorous methodology and using the outcomes of all studies, we have concluded that HA is an effective treatment for osteoarthritis.</td>
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<td>Baran et al. 2011</td>
<td>Therapeutic trajectory following intra-articular hyaluronic acid injection in knee osteoarthritis: a meta-analysis</td>
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<td>We found that the optimal duration of treatment is 6 months.</td>
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<td>Divakar et al. 2007</td>
<td>Visco-supplementation for knee osteoarthritis: a systematic review</td>
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<td>Based upon this systematic review, we conclude that visco-supplementation is an effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Dargan et al. 2006</td>
<td>Intra-articular hyaluronic acid (visco-supplementation) for knee osteoarthritis</td>
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<td>We found that visco-supplementation is an effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Medina et al. 2006</td>
<td>Knee osteoarthritis: should your patient opt for hyaluronic acid injection?</td>
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<td>Based on this meta-analysis, we conclude that visco-supplementation is a safe and effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Bullany et al. 2000</td>
<td>Visco-supplementation for the treatment of osteoarthritis of the knee</td>
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<td>In general, visco-supplementation is an effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Medea et al. 2005</td>
<td>Hyaluronic acid injections relieve knee pain</td>
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<td>We found that visco-supplementation is an effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Arvich et al. 2005</td>
<td>Intra-articular hyaluronic acid for the treatment of knee osteoarthritis of the knee: a systematic review and meta-analysis</td>
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<td>According to the current evidence, intra-articular hyaluronic acid has not been proven effective and may be associated with a higher risk of adverse events.</td>
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<td>Wang et al. 2004</td>
<td>Therapeutic efficacy of hyaluronic acid visco-supplementation on osteoarthritis of the knee: A meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials</td>
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<td>This meta-analysis confirmed the therapeutic efficacy of visco-supplementation with hyaluronic acid for the treatment of osteoarthritis of the knee.</td>
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<td>Le et al. 2003</td>
<td>Intra-articular hyaluronic acid injection in the treatment of knee osteoarthritis: a meta-analysis</td>
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<td>We found that visco-supplementation is an effective treatment for knee OA.</td>
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<td>Exwell et al. 2003</td>
<td>Efficacy and safety of visco-supplementation with hyaluronic acid in the treatment of knee osteoarthritis: a systematic review</td>
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<td>We found that visco-supplementation with hyaluronic acid is an effective and safe treatment for knee OA.</td>
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**Table 2**
Why it is important to do this review
Existing research and guidelines on management of OA disagree on the potential benefit of HA resulting in low strength of recommendation (5). In 2010, the ‘Osteoarthritis Research Society International’ (OARSI), reported superior effect size of intra-articular HA compared to intra-articular corticosteroids at 5-13 weeks, but no effect after 14 weeks following completion of treatment. No serious adverse events were reported. OARSI suggests publication bias and no evidence for significant pain relief when analyses were restricted to high quality studies (18). In 2012, the American College of Rheumatology, (ACR), ‘Recommendations for the Use of Nonpharmacologic and Pharmacologic Therapies in Osteoarthritis of the Hand, Hip, and Knee’ makes no recommendation regarding the use of intra-articular HA while conditionally recommending intra-articular corticosteroids (19). According to the quality of the existing systematic reviews (see Table 1) the methodological differences across meta-analyses could explain some of the discrepancies.

Objectives
The aim is to estimate the efficacy and safety of HA in subjects with symptomatic osteoarthritis vs. sham or non-intervention control.

METHODS
Protocol and registration
Our protocol is registered on PROSPERO (CRD42014007284); We will follow this protocol through all review steps. All steps will be performed according to the MECIR recommendations, and the subsequent manuscript will be reported according to the ‘Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses’ (PRISMA) statement (20).

Eligibility criteria
Types of studies
Only randomised or quasi-randomised, controlled trials which compare viscosupplementation with sham or with non-intervention control will be considered eligible for inclusion in the meta-analysis. No language restrictions will be applied.
**Types of participants**
We will include studies if the authors report that participants are clinically diagnosed with osteoarthritis according to ACR criteria (21). We have no restriction concerning race or sex, but will only include studies with participants above 18.

**Types of interventions**
We will include studies, which have used any types of viscosupplementation with all types of HA. There will be no restrictions on dosage; molecular weight, number of injections per cycle, or follow-up duration. Studies without an “inactive” control group will be excluded. Studies where viscosupplementation with HA is used following a surgical procedure will not be included.

**Types of outcome measures**
As primary outcomes we will use pain and serious adverse events. As secondary outcomes we will use physical function and discontinuation due to adverse events.

**Primary outcomes**
*Pain:* If data is reported on more than one pain scale we will use the prioritised list of patient-reported outcomes for systematic reviews and meta-analysis developed by Juhl et al. presented below (22).

1. WOMAC pain subscale (Likert/100mm)
2. Pain during activity (VAS)
3. Pain during walking (VAS)
4. Global knee pain (VAS)
5. Pain at rest (VAS)
6. SF-36 (bodily pain (BP) subscale)
7. HAQ (pain subscale), Lequesne algofunctional index (pain subscale), AIMS (pain subscale), Knee-Specific Pain Scale (KSPS), McGill Pain Questionnaire (pain intensity), ASES (pain subscale), SES (Schmerzempfindungsskala)
8. Pain at night (VAS), pain during activity (NRS), pain on walking (NRS), number of painful days (days)

*Serious adverse events:* Adverse events categorized as a serious deterioration in health either resulting in: patient hospitalization, prolongation of existing hospitalization, permanent impairment of body structure or body function, life-threatening illness or injury, cognital abnormality of offspring or death (23).
Secondary outcomes

**Physical function:** If data is reported on more than one physical function scale we will use the prioritised list of patient-reported outcomes developed by Juhl et al. for systematic reviews and meta-analyses presented below (22).

1. WOMAC subscale function (Likert/100mm)
2. SF-36 (subscale physical function (PF))
3. Physical composite score (PCS) based on SF-36, SF-12, or SF-8
4. HAQ (disability subscale), PDI (pain disability index), ASES (disability subscale)

**Discontinuation due to adverse events:** Any adverse events that leads to withdrawal.

**Time point**

We will use data from the outcome assessment conducted 3 months (range: 8-16 weeks) following completion of the intervention as the time point of primary interest. When data are available, we will also extract the effects at long-term follow-up defined as 6 months from baseline (range: 4-7 months).

**Searches and selection of trials and meta-analyses**

We will follow the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic review and meta-analysis in the literature search and selection (24). Studies will be identified by searching bibliographic databases, including MEDLINE via Pubmed from 1966, EMBASE via Ovid from 1974, Web of Science via Web of Knowledge from 1960 and the Cochrane Library from 1998, all up to march 1st 2014. The limitation human will be imposed where possible.

Manual searches including scanning of reference lists of identified systematic reviews will be performed. We will search specialist journals; 'Osteoarthritis and Cartilage' and 'Arthritis and Rheumatology', and conference proceedings; OARSI, ACR and EULAR from 2012 to 2014. Unpublished trials will be sought by correspondence with experts in the field of osteoarthritis and/or viscosupplementation and by searching in clinicaltrials.gov and the http://apps.who.int/trialsearch/.

No language, publication date, or publication status restrictions will be imposed.

Eligibility assessment will be performed in a standardised manner by to independently reviewers (MJ, HB). Disagreement will be solved by consensus or help from a third reviewer (RC). Duplicate records will be removed from the selected references. Two independent review authors (MJ, HB) will screen identified titles and abstracts to identify potentially relevant studies. Full text articles will be obtained and two independent reviewers (MJ, HB) will screen for eligibility and
decide on their inclusion. Disagreement will be solved by consensus or help from a third reviewer (RC). A record of agreement and reasons for excluding studies will be kept. If multiple reports relating to the same trial are detected, only the original data or report with data of relevance will be used.

**Search terms**

**Search terms related to osteoarthritis**

osteoa[rthri* OR osteo arthri* OR osteoarthro* OR arthro* OR gonarthriti* OR gonarthro* OR coxarthriti* OR coxarthro*]

**Search terms related to hyaluronic acid/viscosupplementation**

hyaluronic acid OR viscosupplement* OR visko supplement* OR visco supplement* OR visko supplement* OR Adan* OR arthrum* OR artz* OR BioHy* OR biotty* OR Durolane* OR euflexxa* OR gel200* OR gel-200* OR GelOne* OR Gel-One* OR GF-20* OR go-on* OR healon* OR HYADD* OR hya-ject* OR hyalan* OR hyalart* OR hyalectin* OR hyalgan* OR hyaluron* OR hy-gag* OR hylan* OR monovisc* OR nrd101* OR nrd 101* OR nuflexxa* OR orthovisc* OR ostenil* OR polireumin* OR RenehaVis* OR replasyn* OR supartz* OR suplasyn* OR synov-hyal* OR synvisc*

**Search terms related to design**

randomized OR randomised OR controlled OR placebo* OR random OR control group OR double blind OR doubleblind OR single blind OR singleblind

**Risk of bias in individual studies**

Quality assessment in the included studies will be performed using the risk of bias tool recommended by the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic review and meta-analysis chapter 8 (24). Two reviewers (MJ, HB) will independently assess specific domains. Each of those key domains of methodological quality will be categorised as Adequate (low risk of bias), Unclear, or Inadequate (high risk of bias). Disagreements will be solved by discussion and if agreement cannot be reached, it will be decided by third reviewer (RC). The risk of bias quality assessment will be pilot tested on ten randomly selected eligible studies.
• **Sequence generation**

*Adequate* will be applied if a random approach in the sequence generation process referred to a random number table, a random computer generated number, coin tossing, drawing of lots, shuffling cards, or throwing dice is described.

*Inadequate* will be applied if a sequence generation process referred to as date of birth, inclusion or admission, or record number of clinic/hospital is described

*Unclear* will be applied if the information about the process is insufficient to make the judgement.

• **Allocation concealment**

*Adequate* will be applied if central allocation is used (including web based or pharmacy controlled randomization). if there are used sequentially numbered drug containers of identical appearance or if sequentially numbered, opaque, sealed envelopes is provided. Inadequate will be applied if assignment envelopes without appropriate safeguards is provided (e.g. unsealed or non-opaque or not sequentially numbered).

*Inadequate* will be applied if a predictable assignment i performed (e.g. date of birth, alternation, open random allocation schedule, unsealed envelopes or any other explicitly unconcealed procedure)

*Unclear* will be applied if allocation concealment is not reported or insufficient information to make the judgement.

• **Blinding**

*Adequate* will be applied if the participants, personnel and outcome assessors are ensured complete lack of knowledge of treatment allocation; If the provision of indistinguishable products in the active and control group are provided; If the outcome measures are not assumed to be affected by the lack of blinding or if safety outcomes is assumed not to be affected by the lack of blinding.

*Inadequate* will be applied if there is no blinding or incomplete blinding of participants, personnel and outcome assessors; if self-reported pain and disability outcomes are assumed to be affected by the lack of blinding or if blinding is attempted, but it is likely that the blinding could have been broken.

*Unclear* will be applied if insufficient information of blinding is reported.

• **Incomplete outcome data addressed**

*Adequate* will be applied if all randomized patients were included in the group they were originally allocated to, regardless of their adherence to the study protocol, in an intention to treat analysis (ITT); if there is no missing data; if the missing data is not related to outcomes (e.g emigration); if
missing data is evenly distributed across groups and of the similar reasons across groups; if missing data is imputed using appropriate methods (e.g. multiple imputation analysis and worst case analysis).

_Inadequate_ will be implied if reason for missing outcome data likely to be related to true outcome, with either imbalance in numbers or reasons for missing data across intervention groups; if ‘As-treated’ (per protocol) analysis done with substantial departure of the intervention received from that assigned at randomization or if potentially inappropriate application of simple imputation (e.g. “last observation carried forward”).

_Unclear_ will be applied if insufficient reporting of attrition/exclusions to permit judgement of adequate or inadequate (e.g. number randomized not stated, no reasons for missing data provided).

- **Selective outcome reporting**

  _Adequate_ will be applied if pre-specified outcomes are reported as described in the protocol (For studies published after 1st July 2005, we will screen http://apps.who.int/trialsearch/ and www.clinicaltrials.gov for the a priori trial protocol); if a protocol is not available but all expected outcomes are reported, independently of the statistical significance of the results; if prespecified outcome listed in the Methods section are the same as those reported in the Result section (with distinction made between primary and secondary outcomes).

  _Inadequate_ will be applied if not all of the study’s pre-specified primary outcomes have been reported; if one or more primary outcomes is reported using measurements, analysis methods or subsets of the data (e.g. subscales) that were not pre-specified; if one or more reported primary outcomes were not pre-specified (unless clear justification for their reporting is provided, such as an unexpected adverse effect); if one or more outcomes of interest in the review are reported incompletely so that they cannot be entered in a meta-analysis or if the study report fails to include results for a key outcome that would be expected to have been reported for such a study.

  _Unclear_ will be applied if insufficient information to reach a judgement (e.g. study protocol not available and no outcome prespecified, with distinction made between primary and secondary outcomes in the Methods section).

- **Other potential source of bias**

  Industry supported trials:

  _Adequate_ will be applied if the trial setting is supported by a non-profit foundation or similar organization, where a positive outcome will not have economically benefits.
Inadequate will be applied if the trial setting is supported by a for-profit organization or similar organization, where a positive outcome will have economically benefits or if funding is not reported. Single-centre vs. Multi-centre trials:
Adequate will be applied if the trial is designed as a multi-centre trial. Inadequate will be applied if designed as a single-centre trial.

Each RCT will be assigned an overall Risk of Bias term.

Low Risk of bias will be applied when the study follows the protocol e.g. available in clinicaltrial.gov or are considered to have minor limitations that are considered not to have influence on the estimate in the above listed Risk of Bias; concerning sequence generation, allocation concealment, blinding, incomplete outcome data addressed and selective outcome reporting.

High Risk of Bias will be applied when no protocol is available or if serious limitations in the above listed Risk of Bias

Unclear Risk of Bias will be applied if there are uncertainty concerning the above listed Risk of Bias.

**Data collection process and data items**

Data will be extracted using a standardised form. The data extraction sheet will be pilot tested on ten randomly selected eligible studies, and refined accordingly. Two reviewers (MJ, HB) will independently extract data from the included trials. Extracted data will be entered into Review Manager (RevMan; Version 5.2, Copenhagen: The Nordic Cochrane Centre, The Cochrane Collaboration, 2012). Disagreements will be solved by discussion and if agreement cannot be reached, it will be decided by third reviewer (RC).

If incomplete data is detected in a study, the author of the primary study will be contacted to obtain additional data.

The following data will be extracted by default:

- General study information: Study ID; main author, publication year, title, contact author, publication source, publication status, country of main author and trial sponsors.
- Characteristics of the methods: Study design (e.g parallel group, 2x2 factorial design, etc.), number of participants (randomised/analysed), study duration from baseline to end of follow-up, use of sham/control.
- Characteristics of the intervention: Joint (knee, hip and other), type of HA (manufacturer/druglabel); dose; average molecular weight, molecular structure; number of cycles; and number of injections. Ultrasound monitored injected/not ultrasound monitored injections.

- Internal validity: classification of studies according to risk of bias (see above): randomisation procedure, concealment of allocation, blinding of participants/personnel, blinding of outcome assessors, handling of missing data with a proper intention-to-treat analysis (ITT) strategy, type and source of funding and foundations, and type of study (single- or multicentre trial).

- External Validity: combined baseline characteristics of the intervention and control groups: trial inclusion criteria, exclusion criteria, diagnostic criteria, average age, number of females sex (no [%]) and average duration of symptoms.

  Outcome measures: efficacy assessed as follow-up data, in available outcome measure in/of pain, disability and exploratory outcomes.

- Safety outcomes will be assessed as the number of serious adverse events and withdrawal due to adverse events.

Results will be extracted as the ITT population where possible.

In studies with more than one active intervention arm, the placebo group will be split up to avoid inflated standard errors as recommended in Cochrane Handbook Chapter 16 (24).

For continuous outcomes changes in pain, function and physical performance will be extracted as follow-up data with standard deviations on the basis of standard errors, confidence intervals (CI) or P values for differences in means (MD) between the experimental group and the control group as recommended by The Cochrane Handbook (24).

When extracting data we will use a prioritised list presented below. If both follow-up data and change from baseline are available both will be extracted. If follow-up data in mean values are unavailable, change score will be extracted and these combined (24, 25).

1. Follow-up data
2. Change from baseline

Safety outcomes will be extracted as dichotomous data (patients with serious adverse events and patients withdrawing from the study due to adverse events) according to the numbers in each of the two outcome categories in each of the intervention groups (the numbers needed to fill in the four boxes nE, NE, nC, NC) and entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet as the numbers with the outcomes and the total sample sizes for the two groups.
Data synthesis and analysis

**Measures of treatment effect** (summary measures)

The results of the studies will be analysed using Review Manager (RevMan 5.2), Stata V.12 (Stata Corp, Texas, USA) and SAS software (PROC MIXED version 9.2; SAS Institute Inc., Cary, NC, USA). The primary meta-analysis will be performed using random effects models owing to an expected intertrial heterogeneity.

Continuous data will be expressed as the standardized mean difference (SMD) and dichotomous data will be expressed as relative risk (RR) with their respective confidence intervals (CI).

We have prespecified a minimal clinical important difference approximated to an effect size of 0.2 according to Cohen (26).

Negative effect sizes will indicate a beneficial effect (e.g. reduction in pain) of the experimental intervention relative to the control.

**Assessment of heterogeneity**

In addition to reviewing forest plots the intertrial heterogeneity will be expressed using the inconsistency $I^2$ index, which can be interpreted as the percentage of total variation across several studies due to heterogeneity. An $I^2$ value from 0% to 40 % might not be important, 30% to 60% may represent moderate heterogeneity, 50% to 90% may represent substantial heterogeneity and 75% to 100% considerable heterogeneity (24). In the case of substantial heterogeneity, the data will be explored further, including sub-group analyses, in the attempt to explain the heterogeneity.

**Sensitivity analysis and risk of bias across studies**

Stratified analysis will be performed on the primary outcomes pain and serious adverse events.

The following subgroup analyses are pre-specified in order to explore possible clinical differences between effects sizes:

- Risk of bias analysis (24)
- Type of sham/control intervention
- Single-centre vs. multi-centre trial
- Publication status
- Funding
- Number of cycles and injections
• Follow-up duration
• Molecular weight
• Molecular structure
• Manufacturer/druglabel
• Joint (knee, hip, other [incl. ankle, shoulder, hand, tendi-mandibular-joint])

Furthermore small study bias analysis will be performed.

On adverse events we will estimate the Number Needed to Treat in order to harm a patient (NNT[H]), with a 95% CI on the basis of the combined RR value, applying the overall event rate in the placebo/sham groups as a proxy for baseline risk.

Additionally we will estimate the Number Needed to Treat for an additional beneficial outcome (NNT[B]) with a 95% CI on the basis of a (log) odds ratio transformed from SMDs of continuous data (24).

Summary of findings
We will include a ‘Summary of findings’ table which will provide key information concerning the quality of evidence, the magnitude of effect of the interventions examined, and the sum of available data on the main outcomes, as recommended in the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions and an overall grading of the evidence related to each main outcome, using the GRADE approach (24).

ETHICS AND DISSEMINATION
The study will evaluate the impact (effect and adverse events) of viscosupplementation with all types of HA on osteoarthritis. Despite previous research there remain some uncertainties about the effect size and adverse events and the severity of these.

For the patients for whom non-pharmacological treatment methods are not feasible pharmacological treatment is the available option. The Public Health Care System is obliged to the patients to offer treatment possibilities that have a maximal clinically relevant effect and with a minimum of adverse events.

Consequently the results will possibly contribute to the clinical management of patients with osteoarthritis. MJ and HB will draft a paper describing the systematic review and meta-analysis and
the study will be disseminated by an international peer-reviewed journal and internally conference presentation.
We will submit the results of the trial for publication irrespective of outcome.

**Contributors**

HB and MJ wrote the first draft of the protocol. RC and CJ provided statistical advice for the design. RC and EMB contributed to search strategy development. All authors participated in the trial design, provided feedback on drafts of this paper and read and approved the final manuscript.

**Funding**

This trial is partially funded by the Oak Foundation via unrestricted grants. The funders do not have any role in this study other than to provide funding. This research did not otherwise receive specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors. No sponsor was involved in study design, and no sponsor will have authority in collection, management, analysis and interpretation of data. Writing of the report and the decision to submit the results for publication is strictly made by the authors.

**Competing interests**

Musculoskeletal Statistics Unit, The Parker Institute is grateful for the financial support received from public and private foundations, companies and private individuals over the years. The Parker Institute is supported by a core grant from the Oak Foundation; The Oak Foundation is a group of philanthropic organizations that, since its establishment in 1983, has given grants to not-for-profit organizations around the world.

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.
Reference:

European Commission; 2010 [cited 2013 20 September]; Available from:

http://handbook.cochrane.org/.
