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**Most Patient Education Materials on Shoulder Conditions from the American Academy of
Orthopaedic Surgeons Exceed Recommended Readability Levels**

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1 **Most Patient Education Materials on Shoulder Conditions from the American Academy of** 2 **Orthopedic Surgeons Exceed Recommended Readability Levels**

3 **Abstract**

4 **Introduction**

5 A growing number of patients use the internet to learn about their conditions and management
6 options, but there may exist a disconnect between the readability of online education materials
7 and a patient's health literacy. This issue is of particular relevance for shoulder conditions, where
8 even with traumatic injuries (e.g. clavicle fracture, shoulder dislocation), treatment is
9 discretionary, directed primarily at quality of life, and therefore highly preference-sensitive.
10 The purpose of this study was to utilize multiple readability algorithms to calculate the
11 readability of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons (AAOS) patient education
12 materials pertaining to diseases and conditions of the shoulder.

13 **Methods**

14 Online patient education articles from the AAOS pertaining to diseases and conditions of the
15 shoulder were reviewed. The articles were modified for analysis using Readability Pro and
16 readability scores were computed using the following 9 algorithms: Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level,
17 Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning Fog Index, Coleman-Liau Index, Simple Measure of the
18 Gobbledygook Index (SMOG), Automated Readability Index, FORCAST, New Dale and Chall
19 Index. A list of suggested word changes to improve the readability of included articles was
20 compiled from Readable Pro. The average number of illustrations (images and/or videos)
21 included per article was documented.

22 **Results**

23 Twenty eight articles were included for analysis. For each of the algorithms studied, the average
24 scores were as follows: Flesch Kincaid Grade Level was 8.8 ± 0.8 [range 7.2-10.2]; recommended
25 score: ≤ 8.0 , Flesch Reading Ease 54.3 ± 5.3 [range 45.3-64.1]; recommended score: ≥ 60 ,
26 Gunning Fog 10.8 ± 1.2 [range 8.3-13.1]; recommended score: ≤ 8.0 , Coleman-Liau 11.2 ± 0.9
27 [range 9.2-12.9]; recommended score: ≤ 8.0 , SMOG index 11.4 ± 0.8 [range 9.2-12.9];
28 recommended score: ≤ 8.0 , Automated Readability Index 8.4 ± 0.8 [range 6.9-10.0]; recommended
29 score: ≤ 8.0 , FORCAST 11.2 ± 0.4 [range 10.2-12.0]; recommended score: ≤ 9.0 , and New Dale
30 and Chall Index 5.8 ± 0.5 [range 4.9-7.2 recommended score: $\leq 6.0-6.9$]. The average number of
31 illustrations per article was 4.5 ± 3.1 [range 1-14].

32 **Conclusion**

33 The readability of most patient education materials from the AAOS pertaining to diseases and
34 conditions of the shoulder is higher than recommended across a variety of algorithms. Efforts to
35 revise the readability of online education materials are important to facilitate shared-decision
36 making, particularly in practice settings where most decisions are preference-sensitive.

37 **Level of Evidence:** Education Methodology Study; Analysis of Materials

38 **Keywords:** readability, health literacy, AAOS, shoulder, patient education materials, grade level

39 The internet has become an increasingly popular source of health information. According to
40 recent data, more than 80% of orthopedic patients utilize the internet to learn about their
41 conditions and treatment options prior to physician consultation^{4, 5, 10, 11}. Despite improved
42 access to written education materials, there may exist a disconnect between the readability of
43 these resources and a patient's health literacy. This is especially problematic as low health
44 literacy has been linked to poor patient outcomes, increased healthcare costs, and overutilization
45 of emergency rooms^{3, 6, 21, 23, 28}.

46

47 The ability to understand written text is a critical component of health literacy. A patient's
48 reading skills are measured in terms of grade level, where "functional illiteracy" is equated to
49 zero- to fifth-grade reading skills and "marginal literacy" is equated to sixth- to eight-grade
50 reading skills¹². According to a recent survey study, nearly 50% of the adult US population is
51 functionally or marginally illiterate^{13, 14}. Moreover, substantial limitations in health literacy
52 have been shown to exist among the elderly, unemployed, and those of lower socioeconomic
53 status²⁵.

54

55 In 2010, the Plain Language Initiative was implemented in an attempt to equalize care. This
56 initiative set forth guidelines to ensure agencies use clear communication in order to help their
57 users find, understand, and apply the information to meet their health needs¹⁸. The guidelines are
58 based upon writing for a specific audience, organization of information, word choice, brevity,
59 and conversational voice.

60

61 Numerous agencies including the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Disease
62 Control (CDC), and American Medical Association (AMA) recommend that health materials be
63 written at or below the fourth to eighth grade reading level^{8, 15, 27, 29}. Despite this, multiple
64 studies have shown that the readability level of online orthopedic education materials remains
65 above these levels^{2, 7, 20, 22, 26}.

66

67 The purpose of this study was to utilize multiple readability algorithms to calculate the
68 readability of the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons (AAOS) patient education

69 materials pertaining to diseases and conditions of the shoulder. We hypothesize that the majority
70 of these articles are written above the eighth grade reading level.

71 **Methods**

72 Online patient education articles from the AAOS pertaining to diseases and conditions of the
73 shoulder were reviewed in June 2022⁹. The article topics included for analysis were:

74 Arthritis of the Shoulder

75 Biceps Tendinitis

76 Biceps Tendon Tear at the Shoulder

77 Brachial Plexus Injuries

78 Burners and Stingers

79 Chronic Shoulder Instability

80 Clavicle Fracture (Broken Collarbone)

81 Common Shoulder Injuries

82 Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy)

83 Dislocated Shoulder

84 Erb's Palsy (Brachial Plexus Birth Palsy)

85 Frozen Shoulder

86 Joint Replacement Infection

87 Nerve Injuries

88 Rotator Cuff Tears

89 Rotator Cuff Tears: Frequently Asked Questions

90 Scapula (Shoulder Blade) Fractures

91 Scapula (Shoulder Blade) Disorders

- 92 Shoulder Impingement/Rotator Cuff Tendinitis
- 93 Shoulder Injuries in Throwing Athlete
- 94 Shoulder Joint Tear (Glenoid Labrum Tear)
- 95 Shoulder Pain and Common Shoulder Problems
- 96 Shoulder Separation
- 97 Shoulder Trauma (Fractures and Dislocations)
- 98 SLAP Tears
- 99 Sternoclavicular (SC) Joint Disorders
- 100 Thoracic Outlet Syndrome
- 101 Upper Extremity Limb Length Discrepancy
- 102 The articles were modified to remove any images, figures, citations, references, copyright
- 103 notices, disclaimers, or hyperlinks and converted to plain text in Microsoft Word as previously
- 104 described^{1, 22, 24}. Analysis of the reformatted articles was performed using Readable Pro and the
- 105 following readability scores were obtained (Table 2):
- 106 Flesch Reading Ease
- 107 Flesch Kincaid Grade Level
- 108 Gunning Fog Score
- 109 Coleman Liau Index
- 110 SMOG Index
- 111 Automated Readability Index
- 112 Dale-Chall Readability Score
- 113 FORCAST Grade Level
- 114 Fry Grade Level

115 Each of these algorithms have been used extensively for analyzing the readability of patient
116 education materials ^{2, 20, 26} and are based on the sample text's syllables, words, and sentences to
117 varying degrees (Table 1). While there is no gold-standard readability scoring system, each of
118 these formulas has been shown to strongly correlate and the use of multiple scores is
119 recommended to increase the validity ¹. A list of suggested word changes to improve the
120 readability of included articles was compiled from Readable Pro. The average number of
121 illustrations (images and/or videos) included per article was documented.

122 **Results**

123 Twenty eight articles were included for analysis. For each of the algorithms studied, the average
124 scores were as follows: Flesch Kincaid Grade Level was 8.8 ± 0.8 [range 7.2-10.2]; recommended
125 score: ≤ 8.0 , Flesch Reading Ease 54.3 ± 5.3 [range 45.3-64.1]; recommended score: ≥ 60 ,
126 Gunning Fog 10.8 ± 1.2 [range 8.3-13.1]; recommended score: ≤ 8.0 , Coleman-Liau 11.2 ± 0.9
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128 recommended score: ≤ 8.0 , Automated Readability Index 8.4 ± 0.8 [range 6.9-10.0]; recommended
129 score: ≤ 8.0 , FORCAST 11.2 ± 0.4 [range 10.2-12.0]; recommended score: ≤ 9.0 , and New Dale
130 and Chall Index 5.8 ± 0.5 [range 4.9-7.2 recommended score: $\leq 6.0-6.9$]. The average number of
131 illustrations per article was 4.5 ± 3.1 [range 1-14]. Overall, the average FK score was 8.8 ± 0.8
132 [range 7.2-10.2], with only 21% [6 of 28] of articles at or below the eighth grade reading level
133 (Figure 1). A comprehensive list of suggested word changes to improve the readability of these
134 articles is provided in Table 3.

135 **Discussion**

136 Numerous agencies including the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Centers for Disease
137 Control (CDC), and American Medical Association (AMA) recommend that patient education

138 materials be written at or below the fourth to eighth grade reading level^{8, 15, 27, 29}. In the present
139 analysis, we found that the current AAOS patient education materials pertaining to disease and
140 conditions of the shoulder are not in accordance with these standards. Overall, the average Flesch
141 Kincaid Grade Level [FK] score was 8.8 +/- 0.8 [range 7.2-10.2], with only 21% [6 of 28] of
142 articles at or below the eighth grade reading level. FK score has been used to reflect the overall
143 readability in multiple studies^{1, 2, 20, 24}. Even so, the validity of reading scores is accomplished
144 with the inclusion of multiple algorithms¹. In our study, the readability of each article was
145 higher than recommended by Readability Pro across each algorithm¹⁹.

146

147 Roberts et al previously assessed the change in readability scores of AAOS patient education
148 materials across all subspecialties²⁰. In 2008, the mean FK grade level was 10.4, which
149 significantly reduced to 9.3 in 2014²⁰. Although it is difficult to determine if this change
150 represents a practical difference, this data suggests that some improvement in the readability of
151 AAOS patient education resources has occurred.

152

153 Few studies have assessed the readability of patient education materials for shoulder
154 conditions. In 2018, the readability of 6 patient education brochures provided by the American
155 Shoulder and Elbow Surgeons [ASES] was assessed. Topics included arthritis and total shoulder
156 replacement, arthroscopy of the shoulder and elbow, rehabilitation of the shoulder, rotator cuff
157 tendonitis and tears, tennis elbow, and the unstable shoulder. It was found that the brochures
158 were written well above the eighth grade level, ranging in difficulty from a grade level of 13.4 to
159 15.3²². More recently, the readability of online patient education materials for shoulder
160 arthroplasty provided by the top 25 orthopedic institutions was assessed. Overall, the mean FK

161 score was 9.5 and only 16% of institutions included online material at or below the 8 the grade
162 level²⁴. The findings from these studies suggest that the readability of patient education
163 materials differs by the source and topic of information. Therefore, while our study implies that
164 the shoulder articles from the AAOS website may be more inclusive to patients [lower average
165 FK score] when compared to the information provided by ASES brochures and top academic
166 centers, these comparisons should not be made given the differences in topic number and
167 distribution. However, it is important to recognize that the majority of patient educational
168 materials for shoulder conditions provided by these outlets are likely not suitable for the majority
169 of readers in the United States^{8,16}. It is therefore prudent to understand the components of the
170 readability scores and means for improvement.

171

172 There may be several ways to improve the readability of written patient education materials.
173 Previous studies have suggested that shorter words, using more concise sentence structure, using
174 fewer words per paragraph, and providing more visual material may aid in lowering the
175 readability score²⁸. The article with the highest FK score (10.2) in our study was related to joint
176 replacement infection. Several issues pertaining to word density and writing style were
177 associated with this article. Specifically, 32% of the sentences contained more than 30 syllables
178 and 52% of sentences contained more than 20 syllables. This represents a significant area for
179 improvement given the fact that highly readable content is often associated with roughly 6% of
180 sentences containing less than 30 syllables and roughly 12% of sentences with less than 20
181 syllables. Additionally, 47 words used in this article were classified as “hard words”. While the
182 poor readability of this article may be due to the intrinsic complexity of periprosthetic infection,
183 readability may be improved by substituting exhaustive explanations related to anatomic

184 references, procedural steps, and implant design materials with brief descriptions ²⁴. It is
185 important to note that this article did include a total of 3 images. The use of visual supplementary
186 material in the form of pictures and videos has been shown to improve readability and has been
187 cited as a missed opportunity to increase health literacy ^{17, 24}. However, despite an average
188 number of 4.5 illustrations per article, the overall readability score was still higher than
189 recommended for included articles in our study. This may suggest that the complexity of
190 shoulder topics is high and that significant improvements in readability are unable to be achieved
191 with the incorporation of illustrations alone. As such, emphasis should be placed on improving
192 sentence structure and writing style in addition to the incorporation of visual supplementary
193 material.

194
195 Our study is not without limitations. The formulas used to generate readability scores are
196 determined based upon syllable and character counts in each word, sentence, and paragraph.
197 Therefore, readability scores may be misleading in instances where short but unfamiliar medical
198 terms are used or in cases where short sentences are presented with complex ideas. For example,
199 although the word “arthroplasty” has the same number of syllables as “joint replacement”, the
200 latter may be easier to understand for the general public. Yet, based on syllable count, both
201 words would contribute equally to the readability score. Additionally, each of the algorithms
202 used are unable to evaluate the effect of supplementary visual aids or reader comprehension on
203 the readability score. Therefore, despite a relatively high average number of illustrations used per
204 article in our study, the readability scores may be inflated. Finally, the reading level of the
205 AAOS target population may be different than that of the general patient population. Therefore,

206 although our findings suggest that the readability of these resources is higher than the national
207 recommendations, they may be relevant to this specific audience of readers.

208 **Conclusion**

209 The readability of most patient education materials from the AAOS pertaining to diseases and
210 conditions of the shoulder is higher than recommended across a variety of algorithms. Efforts to
211 revise the readability of online education materials are important to facilitate shared-decision
212 making, particularly in practice settings where most decisions are preference-sensitive.

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288 **Figure and Table Legends**

289 Table 1. Formulas used to calculate the readability scores of included articles

290 Table 2. Individual readability scores for each of the 28 AAOS articles pertaining to disease and
291 conditions of the shoulder

292 Table 3. Suggested word changes to improve the readability of included articles

293 Figure 1. Flesch Kincaid Grade Level for each of the 28 AAOS articles pertaining to disease and
294 conditions of the shoulder

Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	$(0.39 \times \text{mean \# of syllables per word}) + 11.8 \times \text{mean \# of words per sentence}$
Flesch Reading Ease	$206.835 - (1.015 \times \text{mean \# of words per sentence}) - (84.6 \times \text{mean \# of syllables per word})$
Gunning Fog Index	$0.4 \left(\frac{\text{mean \# of words}}{\text{mean \# of sentences}} \times 100 + \frac{\text{mean \# of words} \geq 3 \text{ syllables}}{\text{mean \# of words}} \right)$
Coleman-Liau Index	$\left(0.0588 \times \frac{\text{mean \# of letters}}{\text{word}} \right) - \left(0.296 \times \frac{\text{mean \# of sentences}}{100 \text{ words}} \right)$
Simple Measure of the Gobbledygook Index	$1.043 \times \sqrt{(\text{\# of words with } \geq 3 \text{ syllables}) \times \left(\frac{30}{\text{\# of sentences}} \right)} + 3.1291$
Automated Readability Index	$4.71 \left(\frac{\text{letters}}{\text{words}} \right) + 0.5 \left(\frac{\text{words}}{\text{sentences}} \right) - 21.43$
FORCAST	$20 - \left(\frac{\text{\# of single syllable words in 150 word sample}}{10} \right)$
New Dale and Chall Index	$0.0496 \times \left(\frac{\text{mean \# of words}}{\text{mean \# of sentences}} \right) + 0.1579 \times \left(\frac{\text{unfamiliar words}}{\text{mean \# of words}} \right) + 3.6365$

Table 1.

	Flesch Reading Ease	Flesch Kincaid Grade Level	Cunning Log Score	Coleman Liau Index	SMOG Index	Automated Readability Index	Snoke Readability Score	Dale-Chall Readability Score	FORCAST Grade Level	Illustration/figures
Arthritis of the Shoulder	49.7	9.4	11.9	12.1	12.2	9.1	5.4	6.1	11.3	5.0
Biceps Tendinitis	49.8	8.9	9.8	11.9	10.7	8.3	5.2	6.2	12.0	7.0
Biceps Tendon Tear at the Shoulder	61.1	7.4	8.3	10.2	9.8	7.0	5.0	5.6	11.2	3.0
Brachial Plexus Injuries	50.0	9.9	12.6	11.9	12.6	9.8	5.8	6.5	11.4	10.0
Burners and Stingers	61.0	7.8	9.5	10.5	10.2	7.7	5.1	5.5	11.2	3.0
Chronic Shoulder Instability	49.2	9.1	10.7	12.3	11.3	8.7	5.1	5.7	11.6	4.0
Clavicle Fracture (Broken Collarbone)	63.0	7.2	9.2	10.0	10.2	6.9	4.8	4.9	10.6	6.0
Common Shoulder Injuries	55.1	8.2	10.0	11.8	10.8	8.2	5.0	5.3	11.4	1.0
Complex Regional Pain Syndrome (Reflex Sympathetic Dystrophy)	48.6	9.1	11.4	12.6	11.6	8.8	5.9	7.2	11.8	2.0
Dislocated Shoulder	56.4	8.0	9.0	11.0	10.0	7.5	4.8	5.2	11.1	1.0
Erb's Palsy (Brachial Plexus Birth Palsy)	62.6	7.8	10.1	9.4	10.7	7.3	5.1	5.5	10.5	4.0
Frozen Shoulder	53.3	8.4	9.8	12.0	10.6	8.4	5.2	5.8	11.8	7.0
Joint Replacement Infection	45.3	10.2	13.1	12.9	12.9	10.0	5.4	6.7	11.3	4.0
Nerve Injuries	64.1	8.0	10.2	9.2	10.7	7.6	5.0	4.9	10.2	2.0
Rotator Cuff Tears	57.5	8.2	10.7	10.5	11.3	7.7	5.1	5.4	10.9	14.0
Rotator Cuff Tears: Frequently Asked Questions	53.8	9.5	12.4	10.6	12.3	8.7	5.7	5.5	10.7	2.0
Scapula (Shoulder Blade) Fractures	53.8	8.8	11.0	11.3	11.5	8.3	5.4	5.8	11.4	1.0
Scapula (Shoulder Blade) Disorders	51.1	9.1	12.0	11.8	12.2	8.7	5.4	6.3	11.3	5.0
Shoulder Impingement/Rotator Cuff Tendinitis	58.4	7.9	10.2	10.6	11.0	7.4	5.1	5.4	10.8	4.0

Shoulder Injuries in Throwing Athlete	60.4	9.2	11.0	11.3	11.6	9.6	5.6	6.0	11.1	11.0
Shoulder Joint Tear (Glenoid Labrum Tear)	49.3	9.7	11.8	11.4	11.9	8.8	5.6	6.0	11.5	2.0
Shoulder Pain and Common Shoulder Problems	53.5	8.8	10.5	11.7	11.4	8.6	5.3	5.7	11.3	1.0
Shoulder Separation	48.2	10.1	12.5	11.5	12.5	9.2	5.4	6.3	11.1	3.0
Shoulder Trauma (Fractures and Dislocations)	45.4	9.6	10.8	12.7	11.7	9.0	5.5	6.5	11.8	4.0
SLAP Tears	55.0	8.7	10.7	11.2	11.3	8.3	5.3	5.8	11.3	7.0
Sternoclavicular (SC) Joint Disorders	52.8	9.3	11.8	11.3	12.1	8.9	5.4	6.1	10.8	5.0
Thoracic Outlet Syndrome	56.9	8.5	10.5	11.9	11.4	9.0	5.1	5.3	10.9	3.0
Upper Extremity Limb Length Discrepancy	55.7	8.8	11.4	10.7	11.9	8.2	5.3	5.4	10.5	5.0
Mean (SD)	54.3 (5.3)	8.8 (0.8)	10.8(1.2)	11.3 (0.9)	11.4 (0.8)	8.4 (0.8)	5.3 (0.3)	5.8 (0.5)	11.2 (0.4)	4.5 (3.2)

Table 2.

Term	Alternative
Abnormalities	Defects
Additionally	Also
Antibiotics	Medications
Arthroplasty	Joint replacement
Arthroscopically	With a small camera
Associated	Related
Capsolabral	Joint
Chlorhexidine	Wash
Colonization	Growth
Complications	Problems
Comprehensive	Complete
Considerations	Tips
Contaminated	Polluted
Corresponding	Related
Corticosteroid	Steroid
Degeneration	Breakdown
Differentiate	Separate
Disadvantages	Downsides
Discoloration	Color changes
Discrepancy	Difference
Dramatically	Greatly
Effectiveness	Power
Electrodiagnostic Studies	Nerve tests
Evaluate	Checked
Examination	Check
Familiarity	Experience with
Glenohumeral	Shoulder
Hemiarthroplasty	Partial joint replacement
Immediately	Right away
Immobilization	Casting, splinting
Immobilizer	Cast, sling, splint
Individual	Person, single

Instability	Imbalance
Laboratory	Lab
Miniaturized	Small
Modification	Change
Nonfunctioning	Nonworking
Occasionally	Sometimes
Overexertion	Over working
Particularly	Especially
Progressively	Gradually
Psychological	Mental
Pulmonologist	Lung specialist
Recommendations	Suggestions
Reconstructing	Rebuilding
Regeneration	Regrowth
Rehabilitation	Rehab
Satisfactory	Suitable
Sensitivity	Feeling
Significantly	Seriously
Spontaneously	On its own
Sterilization	Cleaning
Temporarily	Briefly
Underestimate	Misjudge
Visualization	Imaging

Table 3.

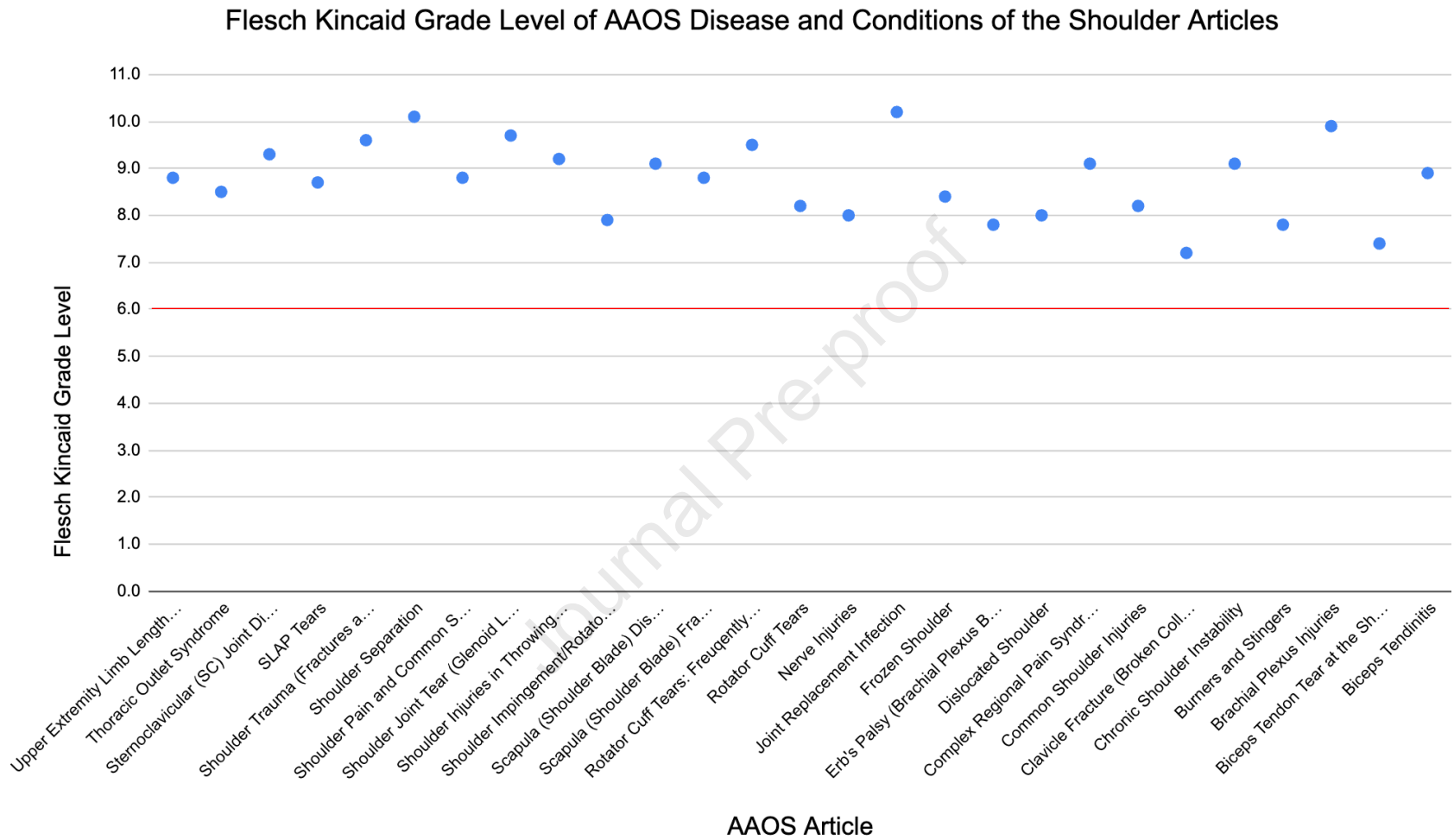


Figure 1.