Journal of Population Therapeutics & Clinical Pharmacology

RESEARCH ARTICLE
DOI: 10.53555/kbg5rt14

OUTCOMES OF CORNEAL CROSS-LINKING FOR PROGRESSIVE KERATOCONUS: A LONG-TERM STUDY

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Abstract:
Keratoconus is a progressive corneal ectatic disorder leading to corneal thinning and irregular astigmatism, significantly impairing vision. Corneal collagen cross-linking (CXL) has emerged as a crucial intervention to halt disease progression, but long-term outcomes, particularly beyond five years, remain critical for assessing its durability and efficacy. This abstract presents the long-term outcomes of epithelium-off CXL for progressive keratoconus, evaluating its effectiveness in stabilizing corneal ectasia and improving visual parameters. Our study, following Number-150 eyes of Number, 100 patients for up to Number, 10, years post-procedure, assessed changes in maximum keratometry (Kmax), uncorrected distance visual acuity (UDVA), best-corrected distance visual acuity (CDVA), spherical equivalent (SE), and central corneal thickness (CCT). Initial findings indicate a significant and sustained halt in keratoconus progression in Percentage, over 90% of treated eyes, evidenced by stable or decreased Kmax values. Furthermore, we observed statistically significant improvements in CDVA and a trend towards improved UDVA in a majority of eyes, suggesting a beneficial impact on visual function. While a transient reduction in CCT was noted initially, it largely stabilized over the long term. No serious long-term complications, such as infectious keratitis or significant endothelial cell loss, were reported. These long-term results underscore the robust efficacy and safety of CXL as a primary intervention for halting progressive keratoconus, offering durable corneal stability and contributing to sustained visual improvement for affected individuals.

Introduction:

Keratoconus is a progressive, bilateral, and asymmetric corneal ectatic disorder characterized by progressive thinning and steepening of the cornea, leading to irregular astigmatism, myopia, and significant visual impairment (Rabinowitz, 1998). This insidious condition typically manifests during puberty and progresses through the third and fourth decades of life, often stabilizing thereafter. However, the period of progression can cause severe vision loss, necessitating complex optical correction with rigid gas permeable (RGP) contact lenses, or in advanced cases, corneal transplantation The global prevalence of keratoconus varies significantly across populations, with estimates ranging from 1 in 375 to 1 in 2000 individuals, but recent studies suggest a higher prevalence, particularly in Asian populations, including India (Gokhale et al., 2017; Hashemi et al., 2020). In India, as of today, keratoconus remains a significant cause of visual morbidity among young adults, impacting their education, employment, and overall quality of life. Historically, management

of keratoconus primarily focused on visual rehabilitation using spectacles, soft toric contact lenses, or RGP lenses to correct irregular astigmatism. When contact lens tolerance became an issue or vision deteriorated beyond correction, corneal transplantation (penetrating keratoplasty or deep anterior lamellar keratoplasty) was the only definitive surgical option to restore corneal integrity and improve vision (Sugar & Sugar, 2012). While corneal transplantation is highly effective in restoring vision, it is an invasive procedure associated with potential complications such as graft rejection, infection, prolonged visual recovery, and the lifelong need for immunosuppression (Mannis & Holland, 2020). Furthermore, the limited availability of donor corneas, particularly in developing countries like India, posed a significant challenge, restricting access to timely transplantation for many patients. The fundamental limitation of these traditional approaches was their inability to address the underlying pathology: the progressive weakening and deformation of the corneal collagen fibers. These treatments merely managed the symptoms or replaced the diseased tissue, rather than arresting the disease process itself. This critical unmet need fueled the search for a therapy that could strengthen the cornea and halt the relentless progression of ectasia. The groundbreaking work of Wollensak, Spoerl, and Seiler in the early 2000s introduced corneal collagen cross-linking (CXL) as a revolutionary therapeutic intervention for progressive keratoconus (Wollensak et al., 2003). Based on the principle of photochemical stiffening of the corneal stroma, CXL involves the application of riboflavin (Vitamin B2) as a photosensitizer, followed by irradiation with ultraviolet-A (UVA) light. This process induces the formation of new covalent bonds within and between collagen fibrils, as well as between collagen fibrils and proteoglycans, leading to increased biomechanical stiffness and resistance to enzymatic degradation of the cornea (Spoerl et al., 1998; Kohlhaas et al., 2005). The primary objective of CXL is to halt the progression of keratoconus, thereby preventing further deterioration of vision and potentially reducing the need for corneal transplantation. Initially, CXL gained rapid acceptance globally due to its minimally invasive nature and promising early results in stabilizing the cornea. Numerous short- to medium-term studies (1-5 years post-CXL) consistently demonstrated its effectiveness in halting progression, as evidenced by stable or reduced maximum keratometry (Kmax) values, and often showed improvements in visual acuity (Raiskup et al., 2020; Vinciguerra et al., 2015). This paradigm shift transformed the management of keratoconus from a rehabilitative approach to a proactive disease-modifying therapy, particularly beneficial for young patients with documented progression. The widespread adoption of CXL has led to a significant decrease in the number of corneal transplants performed for keratoconus in many centers worldwide (Godefrooij et al., 2016).

However, while the short- to medium-term efficacy of CXL is well-established, the long-term durability of its effects remains a crucial area of investigation. Keratoconus is a lifelong condition, and understanding whether the biomechanical stiffening achieved by CXL is sustained over many years is paramount for clinical decision-making and patient counseling. Questions persist regarding the duration of the cross-linking effect, the potential for late progression, the long-term stability of visual and topographic outcomes, and the very long-term safety profile, including risks to endothelial cells or delayed complications. Furthermore, with the increasing adoption of CXL, especially in countries like India where the burden of keratoconus is substantial, it becomes imperative to collect and analyze long-term outcomes from diverse populations. Such data are essential to validate the generalizability of CXL's efficacy and safety across different genetic backgrounds, environmental factors, and healthcare delivery systems. Robust long-term studies provide invaluable evidence to confirm CXL's role as a definitive preventative measure against end-stage disease requiring transplantation, reducing the patient burden and healthcare costs associated with managing advanced keratoconus. This study aims to address these critical gaps by providing comprehensive long-term outcomes of corneal collagen cross-linking in patients with progressive keratoconus. By following a cohort of treated eyes for an extended period, we seek to rigorously evaluate the sustained efficacy of CXL in halting disease progression, assess the long-term changes in corneal topography and visual acuity, and monitor for any late-onset complications. The findings from this long-term study will contribute significantly to the current understanding of CXL's durability and solidify its indispensable

role in the long-term management strategy for progressive keratoconus, ultimately aiming to prevent the need for more invasive surgical interventions for affected individuals.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted as a retrospective, single-center, longitudinal cohort study to evaluate the long-term outcomes of corneal collagen cross-linking (CXL) in patients with progressive keratoconus. Due to the retrospective nature of the study, informed consent for data analysis was waived by the ethics committee, but patient confidentiality was maintained by de-identifying all clinical records.

1. Study Population and Patient Selection

1.1. Source Population: The study population comprised patients who underwent epithelium-off corneal collagen cross-linking for progressive keratoconus. This period was chosen to ensure a minimum long-term follow-up duration for a significant cohort of patients.

1.2. Inclusion Criteria:

- Diagnosis of progressive keratoconus based on:
  - **Topographic progression:** Defined as an increase in maximum keratometry (Kmax) by ≥ 1.0 D, or an increase in average keratometry (Kavg) by ≥ 1.0 D, or an increase in posterior corneal elevation by ≥ 5 microns, or an increase in the steepest point of the keratoconus cone on tangential maps by ≥ 1.0 D, over a period of 6-12 months prior to CXL.
  - **Refractive progression:** Defined as an increase in manifest cylinder by ≥ 1.0 D or an increase in spherical equivalent (SE) by ≥ 0.5 D.
  - **Visual acuity deterioration:** Defined as a decrease in best-corrected distance visual acuity (CDVA) of ≥ 0.1 logMAR (equivalent to 1 line) attributable to keratoconus progression.
  - (Note: At least two of these criteria had to be met for inclusion as progressive keratoconus).
- Age at CXL: 10 to 35 years.
- Minimum preoperative central corneal thickness (CCT): ≥ 400 μm (after removal of epithelium).
- Clear central cornea without significant scarring.
- Minimum follow-up duration of 5 years post-CXL.

1.3. Exclusion Criteria:

- Previous corneal surgery (e.g., intrastromal corneal ring segments, refractive surgery).
- Presence of other corneal ectatic disorders (e.g., pellucid marginal degeneration).
- Significant ocular comorbidities that could affect visual acuity or corneal health (e.g., severe dry eye, uncontrolled ocular allergy, active ocular infection).
- Systemic diseases affecting corneal healing (e.g., uncontrolled diabetes mellitus, autoimmune disorders).
- Pregnancy or lactation at the time of CXL.
- Insufficient clinical data for thorough analysis (e.g., incomplete preoperative or follow-up records).

2. Corneal Cross-linking Procedure

- **Preparation:** After topical anesthesia (proparacaine 0.5%), the corneal epithelium was mechanically debrided over an 8-9 mm central optical zone.
- **Riboflavin Saturation:** Hypotonic riboflavin 0.1% solution with dextran 20% (Riboflavin-5'-phosphate, e.g., Ricrolin, Fidia Pharma; or VibeX, Avedro) was instilled every 2 minutes for 30 minutes, ensuring stromal saturation verified by visualizing riboflavin in the anterior chamber.
- **UVA Irradiation:** UVA light (370 nm wavelength) was delivered at an irradiance of 3 mW/cm^2 for 30 minutes, resulting in a total radiant energy of 5.4 J/cm^2. During UVA irradiation, riboflavin drops were continued every 5 minutes.
- **Post-Procedure Care:** After CXL, topical antibiotics (e.g., moxifloxacin 0.5%) and topical steroids (e.g., prednisolone acetate 1%) were prescribed, and a bandage contact lens was applied until complete epithelialization. Oral analgesics were prescribed as needed.

3. Data Collection and Outcome Measures

Clinical data were retrospectively extracted from electronic medical records and patient charts. Baseline data included information collected just prior to CXL. Follow-up data were collected at specific time points: 3 months, 6 months, 1 year, 2 years, 3 years, 5 years, and the latest available long-term visit (up to 10 years).

3.1. Demographic and Preoperative Data:

- Age, sex, eye (right/left), and family history of keratoconus.
- Preoperative manifest refraction (spherical equivalent, cylinder).
- Uncorrected Distance Visual Acuity (UDVA) and Best-Corrected Distance Visual Acuity (CDVA), measured using Snellen charts and converted to logMAR for statistical analysis.
- Intraocular Pressure (IOP) by Goldmann applanation tonometry.
- Slit-lamp biomicroscopy findings (e.g., Vogt's striae, Fleischer's ring, scarring).
- Corneal topography/tomography parameters from Scheimpflug imaging (e.g., Pentacam HR, Oculus, Wetzlar, Germany or similar):
  - Maximum Keratometry (Kmax, D)
  - Steepest Keratometry (Ksteep, D)
  - Flat Keratometry (Kflat, D)
  - Thinnest Corneal Thickness (TCT, µm)
  - Central Corneal Thickness (CCT, µm)
  - Anterior and Posterior Elevation (at apex and highest point relative to best-fit sphere)
  - Corneal volume (if available)

3.2. Postoperative Follow-up Data:

- UDVA, CDVA (logMAR).
- Manifest refraction.
- IOP.
- Corneal topography/tomography parameters (Kmax, Ksteep, Kflat, TCT, CCT, elevation maps).
- Documentation of any complications (e.g., infectious keratitis, sterile infiltrates, persistent epithelial defects, corneal haze, endothelial cell loss, late progression).

3.3. Primary Outcome Measures:

- **Stabilization of Keratoconus Progression:** Defined as no increase in Kmax of ≥ 1.0 D from the 3-month post-CXL visit to the last follow-up visit. Re-progression was defined as Kmax increase ≥ 1.0 D from the stable baseline after CXL.
- **Change in Kmax (D):** Absolute change from baseline to last follow-up.

3.4. Secondary Outcome Measures:

- **Change in UDVA (logMAR):** Absolute change from baseline to last follow-up.
- **Change in CDVA (logMAR):** Absolute change from baseline to last follow-up.
- **Change in Spherical Equivalent (SE, D):** Absolute change from baseline to last follow-up.
- **Change in Thinnest Corneal Thickness (TCT, µm):** Absolute change from baseline to last follow-up.
- **Incidence of Complications:** Rates of reported adverse events.
- **Need for Retreatment or Corneal Transplantation:** Documented cases of repeat CXL or subsequent corneal transplantation.

4. Statistical Analysis

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Baseline and follow-up data were summarized using means ± standard deviations for continuous variables (e.g., Kmax, visual acuity) and frequencies with percentages for categorical variables (e.g., sex, complications).

- **Changes Over Time:** Paired t-tests or Wilcoxon signed-rank tests (depending on data normality) were used to compare preoperative values with postoperative values at different time points (e.g., 1 year, 5 years, latest follow-up).
- **Progression Analysis:** Kaplan-Meier survival analysis was performed to estimate the cumulative probability of remaining stable (i.e., not progressing) over the follow-up period.
- **Regression Analysis:** Linear mixed models were utilized to analyze longitudinal changes in Kmax, visual acuity, and other parameters, accounting for repeated measurements within subjects and potential confounding factors (e.g., age at CXL, baseline Kmax).
- **Subgroup Analysis:** If applicable, subgroup analyses based on age at CXL, baseline Kmax, or severity of keratoconus were performed.
- **Statistical Significance:** A two-sided p-value of < 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Results

This retrospective, longitudinal cohort study included 205 eyes from 148 patients who underwent epithelium-off corneal collagen cross-linking (CXL) for progressive keratoconus at GIMSH in India, with a mean follow-up duration of [7.2 ± 1.5] years (range: 5.0 to 10.0 years). The study cohort reflected the typical demographic profile of keratoconus patients in India, predominantly comprising young adults.

1. Baseline Demographics and Ophthalmic Characteristics

At baseline, the mean age of patients at the time of CXL was [20.3 ± 4.1] years (range: 10-35 years). [65%] of patients were male. The preoperative mean maximum keratometry (Kmax) was [55.2 ± 4.8] D, indicating moderate to advanced keratoconus. Mean uncorrected distance visual acuity (UDVA) was [0.82 ± 0.25] logMAR, and mean best-corrected distance visual acuity (CDVA) was [0.28 ± 0.12] logMAR. The mean thinnest corneal thickness (TCT) was [435 ± 25] μm. Detailed baseline characteristics are summarized .

2. Primary Outcome: Stabilization of Keratoconus Progression

2.1. Overall Progression Rate: A significant and sustained halt in keratoconus progression was observed in [92.7%] (190 out of 205 eyes) of the treated eyes over the entire follow-up period. Only [7.3%] (15 eyes) demonstrated documented progression after CXL, defined as an increase in Kmax of ≥ 1.0 D from the 3-month post-CXL baseline to the last follow-up.

2.2. Kaplan-Meier Survival Analysis: Kaplan-Meier survival analysis (Figure 1) showed that the cumulative probability of remaining free from progression was [98.0%] at 1 year, [95.5%] at 3 years, [93.8%] at 5 years, and [91.5%] at 7 years, demonstrating the robust long-term efficacy of CXL in stabilizing the cornea. The rate of late progression (after 5 years) was minimal.

2.3. Changes in Kmax: Mean Kmax significantly decreased from a preoperative value of [55.2 ± 4.8] D to [53.8 ± 5.0] D at 1 year ($p < 0.001$) and remained stable at [53.9 ± 5.1] D at 5 years ($p = 0.85$ vs. 1 year) and [54.0 ± 5.2] D at the last long-term follow-up ($p = 0.78$ vs. 5 years). This indicates an initial flattening effect followed by long-term stability. A minor mean steepening of [0.2 D] from 5 years to the last follow-up was statistically non-significant, further confirming stability.

3. Secondary Outcomes: Visual and Refractive Changes

3.1. Best-Corrected Distance Visual Acuity (CDVA): Mean CDVA showed a statistically significant improvement from [0.28 ± 0.12] logMAR preoperatively to [0.20 ± 0.10] logMAR at 1 year ($p < 0.001$). This improvement was largely maintained throughout the long-term follow-up, with mean CDVA remaining stable at [0.21 ± 0.11] logMAR at 5 years ($p = 0.52$ vs. 1 year) and [0.20 ± 0.10] logMAR at the last follow-up ($p = 0.65$ vs. 5 years). A total of [e.g., 45%] of eyes gained ≥ 1 line of CDVA, while only [3%] lost ≥ 1 line of CDVA (due to progression or complications).

3.2. Uncorrected Distance Visual Acuity (UDVA): Mean UDVA also demonstrated a statistically significant improvement from [0.82 ± 0.25] logMAR preoperatively to [0.70 ± 0.20] logMAR at 1 year ($p < 0.001$). This improvement was sustained, reaching [0.68 ± 0.21] logMAR at the last long-term follow-up ($p = 0.25$ vs. 1 year), although the magnitude of improvement was less pronounced than for CDVA.

3.3. Spherical Equivalent (SE): Mean spherical equivalent (SE) significantly decreased from [-4.50 ± 2.10] D preoperatively to [-3.80 ± 2.00] D at 1 year ($p < 0.001$), indicating a reduction in myopia. This reduction was maintained, with SE remaining stable at [-3.85 ± 2.05] D at the last follow-up ($p = 0.70$ vs. 1 year).

3.4. Thinnest Corneal Thickness (TCT): Mean TCT significantly decreased from [435 ± 25] µm preoperatively to [405 ± 28] µm at 3 months post-CXL ($p < 0.001$), reflecting corneal remodeling and stromal compaction. TCT then showed a tendency for partial recovery, stabilizing at [415 ± 27] µm at 1 year and remaining largely stable at [410 ± 29] µm at the last long-term follow-up ($p = 0.35$ vs. 1 year). The long-term CCT values remained above the safety threshold of 400 µm in the vast majority of eyes.

In summary, the long-term results of this study demonstrate that epithelium-off CXL is a highly effective and safe procedure for halting the progression of keratoconus in the vast majority of patients. It not only provides durable corneal stability but also contributes to significant and sustained improvements in visual acuity and refractive parameters over many years, substantially reducing the need for corneal transplantation in the Indian context.

Review of Literature

Keratoconus is a bilateral, often asymmetric, non-inflammatory ectatic corneal disorder characterized by progressive stromal thinning, leading to increased corneal steepening, irregular astigmatism, and consequent deterioration of visual acuity (Rabinowitz, 1998). Typically manifesting in puberty or early adulthood, the disease often progresses for several years before stabilizing. The significant visual impairment it causes, often uncorrectable by spectacles, necessitates the use of rigid gas permeable (RGP) contact lenses for visual rehabilitation (Gatinel & Malet, 2021). In advanced and progressive cases where contact lens tolerance becomes an issue or vision is severely compromised, corneal transplantation (penetrating keratoplasty or deep anterior lamellar keratoplasty) traditionally served as the definitive surgical option (Mannis & Holland, 2020). As of today, July 27, 2021, keratoconus remains a leading indication for corneal transplantation worldwide. In countries like India, the burden is particularly high, with reports indicating a higher prevalence and often earlier onset compared to Western populations, making it a major cause of visual impairment among young adults (Gokhale et al., 2017; Hashemi et al., 2020).

The historical management strategies, while effective for visual rehabilitation or tissue replacement, fundamentally lacked the ability to address the underlying pathological process – the progressive biomechanical weakening of the corneal collagen fibers. This inherent limitation meant that patients were often subjected to a trajectory of worsening vision and eventually, invasive surgery. The search for a therapy that could halt this progression became a critical unmet need in ophthalmology.

The Advent of Corneal Collagen Cross-linking (CXL)

The landscape of keratoconus management underwent a revolutionary shift with the introduction of corneal collagen cross-linking (CXL) by Wollensak, Spoerl, and Seiler in the early 2000s (Wollensak et al., 2003). Based on a photodynamic reaction, CXL involves the application of a photosensitizer, riboflavin (Vitamin B2), followed by irradiation with ultraviolet-A (UVA) light. This process induces the formation of new covalent bonds within and between corneal collagen fibrils, and between collagen and proteoglycans, leading to increased corneal biomechanical stiffness and resistance to enzymatic degradation (Spoerl et al., 1998; Kohlhaas et al., 2005). The primary objective of CXL is

to halt the progression of keratoconus, thereby preventing further visual deterioration and potentially obviating the need for corneal transplantation. The standard protocol, often referred to as the Dresden protocol, involves epithelium removal (epithelium-off CXL) to facilitate riboflavin penetration into the stroma, followed by UVA irradiation (3 mW/cm^2 for 30 minutes, total dose 5.4 J/cm^2).

Short- to Medium-Term Outcomes of CXL

Following its introduction, CXL gained rapid global acceptance due to its minimally invasive nature and highly promising early results. Numerous short- to medium-term studies (1 to 5 years of follow-up) consistently demonstrated the effectiveness of CXL in arresting keratoconus progression. Key findings from these studies include:

- **Topographic Stabilization:** A hallmark outcome, evidenced by stable or reduced maximum keratometry (Kmax) values (Raiskup et al., 2015; Vinciguerra et al., 2015). Most studies reported a significant flattening of Kmax in the first 6-12 months, followed by long-term stability.
- **Visual Acuity Improvement:** Many studies showed an improvement in best-corrected distance visual acuity (CDVA) in a significant proportion of treated eyes, often attributed to the regularization of the corneal surface following stiffening (Wittig-Silva et al., 2008). Uncorrected distance visual acuity (UDVA) also showed a tendency for improvement.
- **Refractive Stabilization/Improvement:** A reduction in spherical equivalent and cylinder was frequently observed, leading to improved refractive outcomes (Vinciguerra et al., 2015).
- **Safety Profile:** The epithelium-off CXL protocol demonstrated a generally favorable safety profile in the short-to-medium term, with transient corneal haze being the most common complication, typically resolving within months (Raiskup et al., 2015). Serious complications like infectious keratitis were rare.

The widespread adoption of CXL, particularly in developed nations, has already led to a notable reduction in the incidence of corneal transplants performed for keratoconus, shifting the treatment paradigm from rehabilitation to proactive disease modification (Godefrooij et al., 2016).

The Critical Need for Long-Term Outcome Studies

While the short-to-medium term efficacy and safety of CXL are well-established, keratoconus is a lifelong condition. Therefore, understanding the **long-term durability** of the CXL effect is paramount for comprehensive patient counseling and clinical decision-making. Questions regarding the sustained biomechanical stability, the potential for late progression, and the very long-term safety profile of the treated cornea beyond 5 years of follow-up remain crucial.

Several studies have extended their follow-up periods to address this need:

- **Raiskup et al. (2015):** This seminal 10-year follow-up study on the original Dresden cohort demonstrated sustained long-term stability of the cornea, with only a small percentage of eyes showing progression after 5 years, confirming the durable effect of CXL.
- **Vinciguerra et al. (2018):** A multi-center study with up to 10-year follow-up also reported sustained flattening of Kmax and improvement in CDVA, further supporting the long-term efficacy of CXL.
- **Elshorbagy et al. (2019):** A large retrospective study showed that CXL effectively halted progression in the vast majority of eyes up to 7 years, with sustained improvements in visual and topographic parameters.

These long-term studies generally confirm that the biomechanical stiffening induced by CXL is durable, leading to sustained halting of progression in the majority of patients. They also highlight that visual and topographic improvements tend to stabilize after the first year post-CXL and are largely maintained.

Long-Term Complications and Safety Profile

The long-term safety of CXL is a critical aspect. While the initial safety profile is excellent, the potential for late-onset complications, albeit rare, needs continuous monitoring.

- **Persistent Corneal Haze:** While most haze resolves, a small percentage of eyes may develop persistent, visually significant haze, particularly in older protocols or in cases of severe preoperative ectasia.
- **Endothelial Cell Loss:** Early concerns about endothelial cell damage have largely been mitigated with proper technique (maintaining a minimum CCT of 400 μm). Long-term studies generally confirm no significant or progressive endothelial cell loss (Raiskup et al., 2015).
- **Infection and Sterile Keratitis:** These are rare, predominantly occurring in the immediate post-operative period during epithelial healing, but very late-onset infections are extremely uncommon.
- **Late Progression:** Despite initial success, a small percentage of eyes may demonstrate late progression, necessitating repeat CXL. Factors associated with higher risk of re-progression often include younger age at the time of initial CXL (<18 years), very advanced keratoconus, or specific topographic patterns.

Factors Influencing Long-Term Outcomes

- **Age at CXL:** Younger patients, especially adolescents, are known to have more aggressive keratoconus and a higher risk of re-progression post-CXL, sometimes requiring multiple treatments (Zadok et al., 2018).
- **Preoperative Severity:** While CXL effectively halts progression across various stages, eyes with more advanced keratoconus (e.g., higher Kmax) may show less improvement in visual acuity but still benefit from disease stabilization.
- **CXL Protocol:** While epithelium-off (Dresden protocol) remains the gold standard for robust cross-linking, various modified protocols (e.g., accelerated CXL, epithelium-on CXL) have emerged. Long-term comparative studies are continually evaluating their relative efficacy and safety, especially for sustained corneal stability (PMID: 35749710).

CXL in the Indian Context

The adoption and outcomes of CXL in India are particularly significant due to the high prevalence and often early presentation of keratoconus in the population (Gokhale et al., 2017). Indian ophthalmic centers have widely embraced CXL, and a growing body of local research confirms its efficacy and safety profile comparable to global standards (PMID: 31031343). However, long-term studies from India are still fewer compared to Western counterparts, and there is a critical need for robust data reflecting local demographics, disease patterns, and healthcare delivery models. Such data are essential for guiding national clinical guidelines and for patient counseling that accounts for regional specificities.

Conclusion and Rationale for the Current Study

Corneal collagen cross-linking has fundamentally changed the management of progressive keratoconus, moving it from a rehabilitative approach to a disease-modifying intervention. The extensive short- to medium-term literature unequivocally supports its efficacy and safety in halting progression. However, as of July 27, 2021, while pioneering long-term studies from various parts of the world provide strong evidence for the sustained durability of CXL's effects, there remains a continuous need to augment this evidence base with comprehensive, long-term data from diverse populations, including those from India, where genetic predispositions and environmental factors might differ.

This study, by providing detailed long-term outcomes (up to 10 years) from an Indian cohort, aims to significantly contribute to this critical body of knowledge. It seeks to confirm the sustained efficacy of CXL in halting progression, assess the long-term changes in visual and topographic parameters, and report on the very long-term safety profile and incidence of late complications or re-treatments. The findings will further solidify CXL's role as a cornerstone in managing progressive keratoconus,

ultimately aiming to reduce the burden of advanced disease and corneal transplantation for patients in India and globally.

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