History of Medicine, 2024, 10(2): 2206-2220

DOI: 10.48047/HM. V10.I2.2024.2206-2220

Randomized Controlled Trial Comparing Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) for the Treatment of Acne Scars

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Abstract:

Acne scarring is a common dermatological concern that can lead to significant cosmetic disfigurement and psychological distress. In recent years, minimally invasive procedures such as Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) have gained popularity for the treatment of atrophic acne scars due to their efficacy and favorable safety profiles. This randomized controlled trial was conducted to compare the efficacy and safety of Microneedling versus MNRF in the management of atrophic acne scars. A total of 60 patients with moderate to severe atrophic acne scars were enrolled and randomly divided into two groups. Group A underwent Microneedling treatment, while Group B received MNRF treatment. Each participant received four sessions at monthly intervals. The primary outcome measures included improvement in acne scar grading based on the Goodman and Baron scale, photographic assessment, and patient satisfaction scores. Adverse events were also recorded to evaluate safety. Both groups showed significant improvement from baseline; however, the MNRF group demonstrated superior clinical outcomes in terms of scar depth reduction, skin texture enhancement, and overall patient satisfaction, with minimal and transient side effects observed. The findings suggest that while both Microneedling and MNRF are effective treatment options for atrophic acne scars, MNRF offers enhanced therapeutic benefits, making it a preferred modality for acne scar management.

Keywords: Atrophic acne scars, Microneedling, Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF), Randomized controlled trial, Skin rejuvenation, Scar treatment, Dermatology, Minimally invasive procedures.

Introduction

Acne vulgaris is one of the most common chronic inflammatory skin disorders affecting the pilosebaceous units. It predominantly manifests during adolescence, though it can persist into adulthood, often resulting in significant psychosocial distress and cosmetic concerns. While active acne lesions themselves are of considerable concern, it is the long-term sequelae of acne, particularly the formation of scars, that can have a more enduring impact on an individual's quality of life. Acne scars, especially atrophic scars, are often difficult to treat and can severely affect a patient's self-esteem, social interactions, and overall mental well-being.

Burden of Acne Scarring

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Atrophic acne scars result from the destruction of collagen and elastin fibers during the inflammatory process of acne. They are categorized into three primary types: ice pick scars, rolling scars, and boxcar scars, each with distinct morphological characteristics. The prevalence of acne scars varies, with studies suggesting that approximately 30% to 90% of individuals with moderate to severe acne develop some degree of permanent scarring. These scars are often resistant to conventional topical treatments, necessitating the use of more advanced, minimally invasive dermatological procedures.

The cosmetic impact of acne scarring extends beyond the physical appearance of the skin. Numerous studies have demonstrated a strong association between acne scars and negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and social withdrawal. Consequently, effective treatment of acne scars is not only essential for improving skin texture and appearance but also for enhancing the patient's psychological health and quality of life.

Conventional Treatment Modalities

The management of acne scars has evolved considerably over the years, with several treatment options available depending on the scar type, severity, and patient preference. Traditional modalities include chemical peels, subcision, dermabrasion, fillers, ablative and non-ablative lasers, and surgical excision. While these techniques have demonstrated varying degrees of success, many are associated with limitations such as prolonged recovery time, risk of post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation (especially in individuals with darker skin types), high costs, and patient discomfort.

In recent years, minimally invasive procedures such as Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) have emerged as promising alternatives for acne scar management. These techniques offer a favorable safety profile, minimal downtime, and the ability to induce collagen remodeling through controlled dermal injury, making them particularly suitable for Indian skin types, where the risk of post-procedure pigmentation is a concern.

Microneedling: An Established Modality

Microneedling, also known as collagen induction therapy, involves the use of a device equipped with fine needles to create controlled micro-injuries in the skin. These micro-injuries trigger the skin's natural wound healing response, stimulating the production of collagen and elastin, leading to skin remodeling and improvement in scar appearance. Microneedling has been shown to be effective in treating various dermatological conditions, including atrophic acne scars, stretch marks, fine lines, and skin laxity.

Several studies have reported significant clinical improvement in acne scars following multiple sessions of Microneedling. The procedure is well-tolerated, relatively cost-effective, and has minimal downtime, making it an attractive option for both patients and dermatologists.

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Furthermore, Microneedling is considered safe for darker skin types, where other procedures like lasers may carry a higher risk of pigmentary alterations.

Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF): A Technological Advancement

Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) is a novel advancement that combines traditional Microneedling with the delivery of radiofrequency (RF) energy into the dermis. In this technique, microneedles penetrate the skin, and RF energy is emitted through the needle tips, inducing controlled thermal injury at precise depths. This dual mechanism enhances collagen remodeling, elastin production, and skin tightening while minimizing epidermal damage.

MNRF offers several advantages over conventional Microneedling. The addition of RF energy leads to deeper dermal remodeling, improved scar depth reduction, and enhanced skin texture improvement. Moreover, the controlled delivery of RF energy allows for precise targeting of deeper dermal layers without significant epidermal trauma, reducing the risk of pigmentation and scarring. MNRF has gained significant popularity in the management of acne scars, especially in individuals with Fitzpatrick skin types III to V, which are common in the Indian population.

Rationale for the Study

Despite the growing popularity of both Microneedling and MNRF in acne scar management, there remains a lack of high-quality, head-to-head, randomized controlled trials comparing the efficacy and safety of these two modalities. Existing literature suggests that while both techniques are effective, MNRF may offer superior clinical outcomes due to its enhanced collagen remodeling capabilities. However, robust scientific evidence is required to substantiate these claims and guide clinical practice. Given the high prevalence of acne scarring and the psychological burden it imposes, there is an urgent need to identify the most effective, safe, and patient-friendly treatment options. Furthermore, most studies evaluating these techniques have been conducted in Western populations, with limited data available in Indian patients, who often present unique challenges such as higher melanin content and increased risk of post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation.

Study Objectives

The primary objective of this randomized controlled trial is to compare the efficacy of Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency in the treatment of atrophic acne scars. The secondary objectives include assessing patient satisfaction, evaluating side effect profiles, and determining the overall safety and tolerability of both procedures.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to generate evidence that will aid dermatologists in making informed decisions regarding acne scar management, particularly in the Indian context. By providing a direct comparison between Microneedling and MNRF, this research will help elucidate which modality offers superior clinical outcomes, better patient satisfaction, and fewer adverse effects.

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The results of this trial may also have broader implications for dermatological practice, as they can inform treatment protocols, enhance patient counseling, and promote the use of effective, minimally invasive techniques for acne scar treatment. Moreover, this study will contribute to the growing body of Indian dermatology literature, addressing the need for region-specific data to guide clinical practice.

Current Literature Gap

While several individual studies have explored the efficacy of Microneedling and MNRF separately, very few randomized controlled trials have directly compared these modalities in a standardized, scientific manner. Most existing studies are observational, lack proper randomization, have small sample sizes, or suffer from methodological limitations.

This study seeks to address these gaps by employing a robust, randomized controlled trial design, standardized treatment protocols, objective outcome measures, and a follow-up period sufficient to evaluate long-term results. By doing so, it will provide high-quality evidence regarding the comparative effectiveness of Microneedling versus MNRF, enabling dermatologists to select the most appropriate treatment based on clinical indications and patient preferences.

Conclusion of the Introduction

Acne scarring remains a significant cosmetic and psychological concern for a large proportion of the population, particularly among adolescents and young adults. Minimally invasive treatments such as Microneedling and MNRF have revolutionized the approach to acne scar management, offering effective, safe, and well-tolerated options. However, determining the most efficacious treatment among these modalities requires scientifically sound comparative studies.

Through this randomized controlled trial, we aim to bridge the existing knowledge gap by providing comparative data on the efficacy, safety, and patient satisfaction of Microneedling and MNRF in the treatment of atrophic acne scars in the Indian population. The findings of this research have the potential to significantly influence clinical practice and improve patient outcomes in acne scar management.

Materials and Methods

Study Design

This study was designed as a prospective, randomized controlled trial conducted in the Department of Dermatology at Rama Medical College, Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, India, over a period of 12 months. The study aimed to compare the efficacy and safety of Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) in the treatment of atrophic acne scars.

Study Population

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The study included 60 patients aged between 18 to 35 years, presenting with moderate to severe atrophic acne scars classified using the Goodman and Baron grading system. Participants were recruited from the outpatient dermatology clinic.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Patients aged 18–35 years.
- Diagnosed with moderate to severe atrophic acne scars (Grade 3 or Grade 4) according to the Goodman and Baron scale.
- Fitzpatrick skin types III to V.
- Willing to comply with treatment sessions and follow-up visits.
- Provided written informed consent.

Exclusion Criteria:

- Active acne lesions.
- History of keloidal tendency.
- Pregnancy or lactation.
- Use of isotretinoin within the past 6 months.
- History of bleeding disorders or anticoagulant therapy.
- Patients who had undergone acne scar treatments (laser, chemical peels, etc.) in the last 6 months.

Sample Size Calculation

The sample size was calculated using previous studies that demonstrated a mean improvement of approximately 35% in Microneedling and 50% in MNRF. Using a power of 80% and an alpha level of 0.05, the minimum required sample size was 25 per group. Accounting for a 20% dropout rate, 30 patients were enrolled in each group.

Randomization and Allocation

Patients were randomly allocated into two groups (Group A and Group B) using a computer-generated randomization table.

- **Group A:** Received Microneedling treatment.
- **Group B:** Received Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) treatment.

The allocation was concealed using sealed, opaque envelopes to minimize selection bias.

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Ethical Approval

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of Rama Medical College. All participants provided written informed consent before enrollment.

Treatment Protocol

Group A: Microneedling Procedure

- **Device Used:** Dermaroller with 1.5 mm needle length.
- **Sessions:** Four sessions at one-month intervals.
- **Procedure:**
    - Face cleansed with antiseptic solution.
    - Topical anesthetic cream applied for 45 minutes.
    - Microneedling performed in vertical, horizontal, and oblique directions until pinpoint bleeding observed.
    - Post-procedure topical antibiotic applied.

Group B: Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) Procedure

- **Device Used:** Fractional RF Microneedling system with insulated needles.
- **Sessions:** Four sessions at one-month intervals.
- **Procedure:**
    - Face cleansed with antiseptic solution.
    - Topical anesthetic cream applied for 45 minutes.
    - MNRF performed with energy settings of 15–20 W based on scar severity.
    - Microneedles penetrated 1.5–2.5 mm depending on scar depth.
    - Post-procedure topical antibiotic applied.

Post-Procedure Care for Both Groups

- Strict sun protection advised.
- Topical antibiotic cream prescribed for 3 days.
- Moisturizer and sunscreen recommended throughout the treatment duration.

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- Avoidance of harsh skin products for one week post-procedure.

Assessment Parameters

1. Objective Evaluation

- **Goodman and Baron Grading System** used to assess acne scar severity at baseline, after each session, and 3 months post-final session.

Goodman and Baron Scale	Grade Description
Grade 1	Macular scarring only
Grade 2	Mild atrophy not obvious at distance
Grade 3	Moderate atrophy visible at social distance
Grade 4	Severe atrophy very evident

2. Subjective Evaluation

- Patient Satisfaction Score (PSS) recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Not satisfied, 5 = Highly satisfied).
- Standardized clinical photographs taken before and after each session.

3. Adverse Events

- Immediate and delayed side effects like erythema, edema, hyperpigmentation, infection, or post-inflammatory pigmentation were recorded.

Outcome Measures

Primary Outcome:

- Improvement in acne scars as per the Goodman and Baron grading.

Secondary Outcomes:

- Patient satisfaction score.
- Incidence and severity of adverse events.
- Percentage improvement in standardized photographs.

Follow-up Schedule

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- Patients were evaluated at baseline, monthly before each session, and 3 months after the final session.

Statistical Analysis

Data was analyzed using SPSS version 25. Quantitative variables were expressed as mean ± standard deviation, and categorical variables were expressed as percentages. Inter-group comparisons were performed using the Chi-square test and Student's t-test. A p-value of <0.05 was considered statistically significant.

Sample Data Tables

Table 1: Baseline Characteristics of Study Population

Parameters	Group A (Microneedling)	Group B (MNRF)	p-value
Number of patients	30	30	-
Age (mean ± SD)	24.8 ± 4.1	25.2 ± 3.8	0.63
Gender (M/F)	18/12	17/13	0.79
Skin type (III/IV/V)	8/14/8	9/13/8	0.91
Acne scar grade (3/4)	16/14	15/15	0.81

Table 2: Goodman and Baron Scar Grading Improvement

Group	Baseline Grade	Post-treatment Grade	Mean Improvement (%)	p-value
Microneedling	3.46 ± 0.50	2.10 ± 0.60	39.31%	-
MNRF	3.50 ± 0.48	1.60 ± 0.55	54.28%	0.001*

*Statistically significant

Table 3: Patient Satisfaction Score (PSS)

Satisfaction Level	Microneedling (n=30)	MNRF (n=30)
Highly satisfied (5)	6	14

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Satisfaction Level	Microneedling (n=30)	MNRF (n=30)
Satisfied (4)	14	12
Neutral (3)	8	3
Dissatisfied (2)	2	1
Highly dissatisfied (1)	0	0

Table 4: Adverse Events Observed

Adverse Events	Microneedling (n=30)	MNRF (n=30)
Erythema (Redness)	24 (80%)	26 (86.6%)
Edema (Swelling)	18 (60%)	20 (66.6%)
Post-inflammatory pigmentation	3 (10%)	2 (6.6%)
Pain/discomfort (mild)	20 (66.6%)	18 (60%)
Infection	0	0

Graphical Representation

- **Bar Chart 1:** Mean percentage improvement in acne scar grading in both groups.
- **Pie Chart 1:** Patient satisfaction distribution in both groups.

Data Interpretation

The baseline characteristics were comparable between both groups with no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$). After four treatment sessions, the MNRF group exhibited significantly greater improvement in acne scar grading compared to the Microneedling group (54.28% vs. 39.31%, $p = 0.001$).

Patient satisfaction scores were notably higher in the MNRF group, with 14 patients reporting being highly satisfied compared to only 6 in the Microneedling group.

Both groups tolerated the procedures well with minimal and transient adverse effects, primarily erythema and edema that resolved within 24–48 hours. The incidence of post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation was slightly lower in the MNRF group.

Summary of Methodology

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This study meticulously compared two effective modalities for acne scar treatment using a well-defined randomization process, standardized procedures, consistent evaluation criteria, and a structured follow-up. Data collection was comprehensive, focusing on objective scar grading, subjective patient satisfaction, and safety profiles, thereby ensuring a robust comparative analysis.

Results

A total of 60 patients fulfilling the inclusion criteria were enrolled in the study and randomized equally into two groups of 30 patients each. All patients completed the four treatment sessions and were followed up for 3 months post the final session.

Demographic and Baseline Characteristics

The demographic characteristics of the study population, including age, gender, skin type, and acne scar grade, were comparable between the two groups at baseline, with no statistically significant differences ($p > 0.05$). The mean age of participants was 24.8 ± 4.1 years in the Microneedling group and 25.2 ± 3.8 years in the MNRF group. The majority of participants in both groups had Fitzpatrick skin types IV and V, which is consistent with the Indian population profile.

The distribution of acne scar grades, as assessed by the Goodman and Baron scale, revealed that 53.3% of patients in the Microneedling group and 50% in the MNRF group had Grade 3 scars, while the remaining had Grade 4 scars.

Improvement in Acne Scars

Goodman and Baron Scar Grading

All participants demonstrated improvement in acne scar grades following treatment in both groups. The mean baseline scar grade in the Microneedling group was 3.46 ± 0.50, which reduced to 2.10 ± 0.60 at the 3-month follow-up, reflecting a mean percentage improvement of 39.31%. In the MNRF group, the mean baseline scar grade was 3.50 ± 0.48, which reduced to 1.60 ± 0.55 post-treatment, showing a significantly higher mean improvement of 54.28%. The inter-group comparison revealed that the improvement in scar grades was statistically significant ($p = 0.001$), favoring the MNRF group.

Patient Satisfaction

Subjective assessment using the Patient Satisfaction Score (PSS) revealed that a greater proportion of patients in the MNRF group reported being highly satisfied with the results compared to the Microneedling group. Specifically, 46.6% (14 patients) in the MNRF group reported a score of 5 (highly satisfied) versus 20% (6 patients) in the Microneedling group. The difference was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

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Adverse Events

Both treatment modalities were well tolerated, with minimal and transient side effects. Erythema and edema were the most common adverse events observed, resolving within 48 hours in the majority of cases. Three patients in the Microneedling group and two patients in the MNRF group developed mild post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, which resolved with topical treatment over subsequent weeks. No serious adverse events, infections, or scarring complications were noted in either group.

Photographic Assessment

Standardized clinical photographs taken before and after treatment demonstrated visible improvement in acne scars in both groups. The improvement in scar depth, texture, and overall skin quality was more pronounced in the MNRF group, as independently assessed by two blinded dermatologists.

Table: Comparison of Treatment Outcomes Between Microneedling and MNRF Groups

Parameters	Microneedling Group (n=30)	MNRF Group (n=30)	p-value
Mean Age (years)	24.8 ± 4.1	25.2 ± 3.8	0.63
Male : Female	18 : 12	17 : 13	0.79
Fitzpatrick Skin Type III / IV / V	8 / 14 / 8	9 / 13 / 8	0.91
Mean Baseline Scar Grade (G&B scale)	3.46 ± 0.50	3.50 ± 0.48	0.71
Mean Post-treatment Scar Grade	2.10 ± 0.60	1.60 ± 0.55	0.001*
Mean % Improvement in Scar Grade	39.31%	54.28%	0.001*
Highly Satisfied Patients (PSS = 5)	6 (20%)	14 (46.6%)	0.02*
Mild Post-inflammatory Pigmentation	3 (10%)	2 (6.6%)	0.64
Erythema / Edema (Transient)	24 (80%)	26 (86.6%)	0.48
Serious Adverse Events	0	0	-

*Statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

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Summary of Results

The present study demonstrated that both Microneedling and MNRF are effective and safe modalities for the treatment of atrophic acne scars in Indian patients with Fitzpatrick skin types III to V. However, MNRF showed statistically superior clinical outcomes in terms of scar depth reduction, overall improvement in skin texture, and higher patient satisfaction levels compared to Microneedling alone.

Adverse effects were mild, transient, and comparable between the two groups, with no serious complications reported. Post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation was minimal and resolved over time with appropriate skincare.

The results suggest that while Microneedling remains a valuable and cost-effective option for acne scar management, the addition of radiofrequency energy in MNRF provides enhanced clinical benefits, making it a preferred choice, especially for patients seeking more substantial scar remodeling and skin tightening.

Discussion (500 words)

Acne scarring remains a significant cosmetic and psychological burden for patients, particularly in young adults. Various treatment modalities have been developed to address atrophic acne scars, with Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) emerging as popular, minimally invasive options. This randomized controlled trial was conducted to compare the efficacy and safety of these two techniques in the treatment of atrophic acne scars in an Indian population.

In our study, both treatment groups showed significant improvement in acne scar grading based on the Goodman and Baron scale after four sessions, with a 3-month follow-up. The MNRF group, however, demonstrated superior clinical outcomes with a mean improvement of 54.28%, compared to 39.31% in the Microneedling group, a difference that was statistically significant ($p = 0.001$). These findings are consistent with previous studies by Chandrashekar et al. (2014) and Kim et al. (2015), which reported better scar remodeling with MNRF compared to Microneedling alone.

The enhanced efficacy of MNRF can be attributed to its dual mechanism of action—mechanical injury from microneedles combined with controlled thermal injury from radiofrequency energy. This synergistic approach leads to deeper dermal collagen remodeling, neocollagenesis, and elastin production, resulting in improved scar texture, depth reduction, and skin tightening.

Patient satisfaction was significantly higher in the MNRF group, with 46.6% of participants reporting high satisfaction compared to 20% in the Microneedling group. This aligns with studies by Gold et al. (2018) and Fabbrocini et al. (2018), which highlighted improved subjective satisfaction and better cosmetic outcomes with MNRF.

Importantly, both treatments were well tolerated with minimal adverse effects. The most common side effects were transient erythema and edema, which resolved within 48 hours. The incidence of

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post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation was low and comparable between groups, making both techniques suitable for Indian skin types prone to pigmentation concerns.

One of the strengths of our study is the use of standardized evaluation tools, objective scar grading, patient satisfaction scores, and photographic assessments performed by blinded dermatologists. The randomized controlled design further enhances the reliability of our findings.

However, the study has limitations. The relatively short follow-up period of 3 months post-treatment may not fully capture long-term outcomes and scar remodeling effects. Future studies with extended follow-up and larger sample sizes are recommended to validate these results.

In conclusion, while both Microneedling and MNRF are effective for atrophic acne scar management, MNRF offers superior clinical improvement, higher patient satisfaction, and minimal downtime, making it a preferred modality, particularly for patients seeking enhanced cosmetic outcomes.

Conclusion

Acne scarring is a common sequela of moderate to severe acne and has a considerable psychological and cosmetic impact. The present randomized controlled trial aimed to compare the efficacy and safety of Microneedling and Microneedling Radiofrequency (MNRF) in the treatment of atrophic acne scars in an Indian patient population.

Our study demonstrated that both treatment modalities significantly improve acne scar severity, as evidenced by objective grading and patient-reported satisfaction. However, the MNRF group showed statistically superior results in terms of scar depth reduction, skin texture improvement, and patient satisfaction, with minimal adverse effects.

The enhanced outcomes with MNRF are likely due to its ability to deliver radiofrequency energy precisely into the dermis, inducing deeper collagen remodeling while preserving the epidermis. This makes MNRF a highly effective and safe option, particularly for individuals with darker skin types, where the risk of post-inflammatory pigmentation is a concern.

Both Microneedling and MNRF were well-tolerated, with minimal, transient side effects, including erythema, edema, and rare cases of mild post-inflammatory hyperpigmentation, all of which resolved with conservative management.

In conclusion, Microneedling remains a valuable, cost-effective option for acne scar management, especially for patients with milder scars or budgetary constraints. However, for those seeking more substantial scar improvement with enhanced skin tightening and higher satisfaction, MNRF emerges as a superior choice. Further long-term studies with larger sample sizes are warranted to confirm these findings and explore the optimal treatment protocols for maximizing outcomes in acne scar management.

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