The role of exercise and physical fitness in the management of hypertension

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Received: December 8, 2015; Accepted: January 31, 2015

Introduction

The association between physical activity and health was recognized as early as the 5th century BC by the Greek physician Hippocrates, who wrote:

“...all parts of the body, if used in moderation and exercised in labors to which each is accustomed, become thereby healthy and well developed and age slowly; but if they are unused and left idle, they become liable to disease, defective in growth and age quickly.”

With the decline of the Hellenic civilization this concept faded. For centuries, physical activity and fitness were considered largely for military purposes and associated with youth sports and athletics even through the post WWII era.

For over half a century now, a plethora of evidence has accumulated on the beneficial effect of exercise and physical fitness. Findings from well-designed large epidemiologic studies and diverse populations support a robust, inverse, and independent association between physical activity, cardiorespiratory fitness and cardiovascular (CV) and overall mortality risk. The association is independent of age, race, gender, established CV disease, or co-morbidities including hypertension [1,2]. In pre-hypertension, high-normal blood pressure and hypertension, cardiorespiratory fitness exhibits preventive, prognostic and therapeutic properties [1–4]. Thus, appropriate lifestyle interventions including increased physical activity designed to enhance cardiorespiratory fitness, are recommended by the Eight Report of the Joint National Committee on Prevention, Detection, Evaluation, and Treatment of High Blood Pressure (JNC 8) and the European Society of Hypertension/European Society of Cardiology recent guidelines as initial therapy to prevent, treat, and control hypertension [5,6]. This review presents evidence regarding the preventive, prognostic and therapeutic aspects of exercise and fitness status of the individual on blood pressure (BP).
Preventive aspects of fitness on blood pressure

The age-related progressive increase in BP is accompanied by an incremental increase in CV risk evident beyond BP levels of 115/75 mmHg [7]. Evidence suggests that this increase in BP is preceded by arterial stiffness, an important and independent contributor to hypertension [8-12]. To some extent, the age-related increase in arterial stiffness and BP is inevitable (biological aging). However, a substantial portion of the pronounced increase observed in industrialized societies is pathological and more likely a consequence of lifestyle characterized by high-fat and salty diets, and physical inactivity than an inevitable outcome of aging [13-19]. Indigenous populations living a relatively traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle exhibit only a modest and substantially lower increase in arterial stiffness and BP compared to individuals living in westernized environments [14,15]. Additionally, vascular health is improved by habitual physical activity and exercise intervention programs implemented in westernized populations [16-19] and diminished by inactivity and bed rest [18,19]. The exercise-induced increase in shear stress appears to provide the physiological stimulus for the adaptations in endothelial function and vascular remodeling observed following exercise training in healthy subjects [20].

Prehypertension, defined as systolic BP levels of 120–139 mmHg and/or diastolic BP of 80 to 89 mmHg [21] is frequently a precursor of hypertension [22]. The aforementioned findings suggest that cardiorespiratory fitness may attenuate the rate of progression from prehypertension to hypertension. This concept was investigated in 2,303 prehypertensive, middle-aged, male veterans followed for over 9.2 years. Higher cardiorespiratory fitness, as reflected by peak METs; 66% for those with 6.6–8.5 METs, and 72% higher for those with an exercise capacity of 8.6–10 METs; 66% for those with 6.6–8.5 METs, and 72% higher for individuals who achieved ≤6.5 METs [23]. Similar findings have been reported by others [24], and a recent meta-analysis of thirteen prospective cohort studies confirmed an inverse, dose-response association between levels of recreational physical activity and risk for developing hypertension [3].

Collectively, these studies [13-19] support that the age-related insidious increases in arterial stiffness, systolic BP and incident hypertension are not entirely inevitable and that increased physical activity or a physically active lifestyle that leads to increased cardiorespiratory fitness can attenuate and even reverse the process [18,20].

Prognostic aspects of exercise blood pressure

Physiological rise in BP occurs during acute exercise [1]. However, in some individuals, systolic BP rises disproportionately to the workload. This disproportionate BP rise is adversely associated with end-organ damage [25]. For example, in our study of 790 middle-aged, prehypertensive individuals, exercise systolic BP at the workload of approximately 5 METs was the strongest predictor of left ventricular hypertrophy (LVH) [25]. Systolic BP ≥150 mmHg was the threshold for LVH. Individuals who achieved a systolic BP ≥150 mmHg had significantly greater cardiac wall thickness, left ventricular mass (LVM) index (Figure 1) and lower exercise capacity, compared to those with systolic BP <150 mmHg. Furthermore, the risk of LVH increased 4-fold for every 10-mmHg incremental rise in systolic BP beyond 150 mmHg. The resting BP in the two groups (systolic BP ≥150 mmHg and <150 mmHg) was similar. These findings suggest that the BP response to exercise may be used to identify individuals at risk for LVH.

Exercise blood pressure, fitness status and clinical significance

The exaggerated rise in BP during exercise may be modulated by the fitness status of the individual. Systolic BP of fit individuals at approximately 5 METs [25] and ambulatory BP [26] were significantly lower when compared to the BP of low-fit. Also, in a randomized controlled study of hypertensive individuals who completed 16 weeks of aerobic exercise training, systolic BP was 27 mmHg and 32 mmHg lower from pre-training values at the absolute workloads of 3 and 5 METs, respectively [27].

Evidence also suggests that the BP response to exercise or physical exertion may modulate left ventricular structure. In the aforementioned study of prehypertensive individuals [25] the exercise capacity-LVM index association was strong and inverse. The risk for LVH was 42% lower for every 1-MET increase in exercise capacity. When the cohort was stratified based on cardiorespiratory fitness, the least fit individuals exhibited higher exercise systolic BP and LVM index than the moderate and high-fit [Figure 2]. Moreover, the exercise BP at the workload of approximately 5 METs was the strongest predictor of LVH, while resting BP was a substantially weaker predictor. Exercise intervention studies have also reported significant reductions in LVM index in older individuals with stage 1 and 2 hypertension [27-30].
Collectively, these findings suggest: 1) The exercise BP at the workloads of approximately 3–5 METs reflects BP during daily activities; 2) an abnormal BP response at these relatively low workloads (3–5 METs) provides the impetus for increases in LVM and progression to LVH; 3) the exaggerated BP response is attenuated by regularly performed moderate intensity exercises or increased physical activity; and 4) the lower daily BP leads to LVM regression. However, these assumptions are based on prospective epidemiologic data [25,26] and interventional exercise studies are needed to substantiate these findings.

The clinical significance and public health impact of the exercise systolic BP-LVM relationship is two-fold. First, exercise BP may be a marker for present and future LVH and hypertension. Second, the lower exercise BP and LVM index associated with higher fitness suggest that the progression to hypertension and LVH can be attenuated by increased fitness status. Thus, exercise programs designed to improve fitness can be used to attenuate the progressive increase in arterial stiffness, BP and LVH.
Therapeutic aspects of cardiorespiratory fitness

The consensus of meta-analyses and several reviews is that structured aerobic exercise training programs or increased physical activity of moderate intensity and adequate volume result in an independent reduction of approximately 4 to 10 mmHg in systolic and 3–8 mmHg in diastolic BP for individuals with stage 1 hypertension regardless of age or gender [1,3, 31–33]. Relatively little is known on the effects of exercise in individuals with stage 2 hypertension or those with resistant hypertension. We noted significant reduction in BP in male veterans with stage 2 hypertension and LVH after 16 weeks of moderate-intensity aerobic exercise training. At 32 weeks, BP reduction was more pronounced even after a 33% reduction in antihypertensive medication in the exercise group, while BP in the no-exercise group increased substantially [28]. We also noted a significant reduction in cardiac wall thickness and left ventricular mass, similar to that observed with most antihypertensive medications [34]. This finding was unprecedented and clinically significant since LVH is considered an independent risk factor for mortality [35].

Similar findings were observed in individuals with resistant hypertension, defined as BP that remains above goal in spite of the concurrent use of 3 antihypertensive agents of different classes, one of which is a diuretic [36]. In this study, moderate exercise was effective in significantly lowering 24-hour ambulatory BP [37]. The reduction was similar to that reported by previous studies in individuals with mild to moderate hypertension [1,3,31–33].

Almost all of the information regarding exercise and BP is derived from aerobic exercises. Information available on the effects of resistance or strength training on resting BP is limited, conflicting and suggests that resistance training is less efficacious than aerobic exercise [1,3,31,32] in lowering resting BP [38,39]. The reasons for this are not known. However, resistance exercise studies do not consistently support improvements in systemic vascular resistance, endothelium-dependent vasodilatation, and arterial compliance, mechanisms suspected to mediate the hypotensive effects of aerobic exercise [33]. Thus, it is recommended that resistance training may serve as an adjunct to an aerobic-based exercise program for BP reduction [31,32] and implemented as part of a complete exercise program [40,41].

Exercise capacity and mortality risk in hypertensive and pre-hypertensive individuals

Findings from large and well-controlled epidemiologic studies support an inverse, independent and graded association between exercise capacity and mortality risk in pre-hypertensive and hypertensive individuals [42–45]. For example, in a cohort of 4,631 hypertensive veterans with multiple cardiovascular risk factors, who successfully completed a graded exercise test mortality risk was 13% lower for every 1-MET increase in exercise capacity.43 When compared to the least-fit individuals (exercise capacity <5 METs), mortality risk was 34% lower for those in the next fitness category (5.1–7.0 METs) and progressively declined to over 70% for individuals with the highest exercise capacity (>10 METs). When the presence or absence of additional risk factors within fitness categories (least fit to most fit) was considered, the least-fit individuals (<5 METs) with additional risk factors had a 47% higher mortality risk than those without risk factors. This increased risk was eliminated in the next fitness category (5.1–7.0 METs) and declined to approximately ≥50% in those with an exercise capacity >7.0 METs, regardless of CV risk factor status.

The interaction between exercise capacity, body mass index (BMI) and mortality risk was also evaluated in hypertensive veterans. Progressively lower mortality rates with increased exercise capacity were observed within each BMI category. The mortality risk reduction ranged from approximately 40% in those with an exercise capacity of 5.1–7.5 METs to 70% in those with >7.5 METs [44].

To explore the fitness-fatness and mortality risk relationship further, we compared between normal weight-low-fit individuals were compared to overweight or obese, but fit individuals. The mortality risk was 47% and 60% lower for the overweight-moderate-fit and overweight-high-fit individuals, respectively. Similarly, the risk was 55% lower for the obese-moderate-fit and 78% lower for the obese-high-fit individuals. These findings suggest that it is more beneficial to be fit and overweight or obese rather than normal weight and unfit. Furthermore, it appears that obese hypertensive individuals may benefit at least as much (if not more) from fitness than their overweight or normal weight counterparts.44

Finally, similar trends in the fitness-mortality risk association were noted in 4,478 pre-hypertensive individuals and those with high-normal BP (130–139/85–89 mmHg), independent of risk factors [45,46]. The most pronounced reduction in risk (40%) was observed in Low-Fit individuals (peak MET level 6.1–8.0) compared to the Least-Fit (peak MET level ≤6.0), suggesting that relatively low levels of cardiorespiratory fitness are necessary for exercise-related health benefits. Risk reduction was progressive greater in moderate-fit (58%) and high-fit (73%) individuals. The trends were similar, but more pronounced among younger than older individuals. For every 1-MET increase in exercise capacity the adjusted risk was 18% lower for those ≤60 years of age and 12% for individuals >60 years.

In summary, strong evidence supports that regularly performed exercise or a chronic increase in physical activity that leads to increased cardiorespiratory fitness
attenuates the age-related progressive increase in BP and prevents hypertension. In hypertensive individuals, habitual physical activity lowers BP and the risk of mortality, independent of other risk factors. Finally, some evidence suggests that increased cardiorespiratory fitness attenuates the 24-hr BP and the BP response to exercise or physical exertion, thereby lowering the risk for LVH. The dose-response association between increased cardiorespiratory fitness, BP and mortality risk reduction supports the existence of a causal mechanism(s). However, the mechanism or mechanisms are not well understood. It is likely that the favorable effects cardiorespiratory fitness, exercise and physical activity have on several biological systems and traditional risk factors are likely to share the credit.

Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that there are no conflicts of interest.

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