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ORIENTATION ARTICLE

WATER IMMERSION AS A POST-EFFORT RECOVERY FACTOR. A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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In physical preparation is well established the importance of recovery processes in order to achieve high levels of performance. Therefore, and due to the high demands required in the current sports competitions, to enhance recovery processes play an important role in the final performance. Water immersions have been used as a recovery agent by coaches for long. However, only in recent years have been published scientific papers which investigate this topic. The purpose of this work was to establish a theoretic framework based on these publications. It has conducted a thorough bibliographical review in databases Pubmed and SportDiscus, using the keywords “Post-exercise recovery ”, “ water immersion ”, “ thermal responses” and “cryotherapy”. After purifying the papers retrieved, 39 papers were obtained, of which 33 are original research work and 6 are reviews. We must highlight a limiting factor in the extraction of general conclusions: the absence of standard protocols. Therefore, sometimes it is difficult to compare results from different studies. However, two conclusions can be drawn: (1) Hot water (> 33° C) is not a good regenerating agent post-effort, and (2) immersion in cold water (15°C) for 10 minutes, split into periods, facilitates regenerative processes post-effort. About contrasts (alternate cold and hot water) there is less information and results are sometimes contradictory.

Key words: cryotherapy, performance, recovery, contrast therapy, baths.

Introduction

In physical training for sport performance, recovery processes of functional and structural systems of the organism after the physical effort, must be programmed as an important component of sport training process (Siff & Verhoshansky, 1998; Fleck, 1999, Bompá, 2000; Barnett, 2006). Post-effort recovery is a heterogenous process that happens after interrupting the physical activity and restitutes the internal balance (homeostasis) and the capacity to develop an efficient effort (Cochrane, 2004).

The biological regeneration of the organism after the physical effort is not linear in all components, but these presents a very noticeable heterocronism. In addition, this heterocronism is very affected by diverse factors, among which stands out: (1) the internal load caused by the effort, (2) the individual adaptive capacity, (3) nutritional status of the athlete and (4) the used recovery methods.

A correct post-effort recovery produces improvements in two of the most important organic systems: muscular (Fleck, 1999) and cardiovascular (Bosquet et al., 2007). For this reason, Bompa (2000) affirms that approximately the 50% of the athlete peak performance depends on their recovery capacity. Among diverse recovery methods, aquatic immersions are one of the most extended. This is not a nowadays innovation because on Roman Empire days was developed the concept of “salus per aquam” (SPA), that is to say, the health through water (Llana & Perez, 2007). But the scientific interest on thermoregulatory and metabolic responses to water immersion dates from the 1960 decade, and initially, the interest was oriented to the effects on the specific performance on swimming (Craig & Dvorak, 1966; Holmér & Bergh, 1974). From the 1990 decade (Terrados & Padilla, 2004) interest has extended to the society, rising up a great number of SPAs all over the developed countries (van Tubergen & van der Linden, 2002).

Coaches and therapists have paid attention on water exercises at least by the next effects: a) for injuries prevention and for physical rehabilitation (Peyré-Tartaruga & Martins 2006), b) to improve muscular strength (Martel et al., 2005; Tsourlou et al., 2006); c) as a therapy in populations with specific requirements as subjects with fibromialgia (Take et al., 2007; Takeshima et al., 2002) d) flexibility improvement (Burke et al., 2001), e) VO₂máx improvement in sedentary subjects (Reilly et al., 2003), f) to reduce joint compression and to improve venous return (Llana & Perez, 2008).

Regards the recovery effect of aquatic immersions Vaile et al. (2008) indicate that water immersions triggers organic alterations and responses that can be intuited as positive for the post-effort recovery. According to Wilcock et al (2006^a), there are four recognized methods for water immersions to allow this:

- a) Thermotherapy, which means water immersion to increases body temperature. So water must be up to 36°C.
- c) Cryotherapy. Immersion in water bellow 16°C.
- c) Water immersion “per se”. Not hot neither cold water (16°C to 36°C)
- d) Contrasts therapy. Hot (> 36°C) and cold (< 16°C) water alternation.

Among these four options, Wilcock et al (2006b) claims that only cryotherapy and contrast therapy are useful as a post-effort recovery method.

Material and method

The articles location for this systematic review was realised in the two data bases computerized online more important in the scope of the areas of Health and Physical Education:

- PubMed (<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/>): it is the most important data base regards medicine. It depends on the National Bookstore of the United States of America and the National Institutes of Health.
- SportsDiscus: (<http://www.sirc.ca/products/sportsdiscus.cfm>): it is the data base of Sport Information Resource Centre (SIRC) realised by the Coaching Association of Canada.

Key words used for the search were: “water immersion”, “post-exercise” and “post-effort” “recovery”, “thermal responses”, “cryotherapy”, “contrast therapy”. No limits (publication dates, human or animals, gender, type of article or ages) were applied. 56 possible papers were located, among which a selection was made in order to fit the study objectives. After filter all located papers, 39 were elected: 33 are research articles and 6 reviews. To manage this papers, 5 were located online, 30 in the libraries of the University of Valencia and 4 were send by email by the authors after request for them.

Results

Following Wilcock et all (2006b) results of our systematic review will present in two blocks: the first one dedicated to the cryotherapy and, the second one, to the contrast therapy.

1. Cryotherapy

Cryotherapy is defined as the curative and recovery method based on the application of cold on a damaged corporal zone. Water is usually the way used. Also exists the therapy based on “extreme cold ” (- 110° C) applied in air chambers (Westerlund et al., 2003), but a little number of this chambers exist all over the world. So, as Wilcock et al. (2006a) indicate, consensus exists that cryotherapy is based on cold water (< 15°C) immersions.

Body responses to cryotherapy are based on the thermal homeostasis break down: (1) to limit heat loss, peripheral blood vessel constrict (Srámek et al., 2000; Guyton & Hall, 2006) and, (2) to increasing heat generation (thermogenia), tiroxin and catecholamines secretion increases (Guyton & Hall, 2006; Lopez, 2006) and, if this is not enough, involuntary muscular spasms will happen. This can increase until 5 times the muscular heat generation (Wilmore & Costill, 2004; McArdle et al., 2004). Diuresis increase until 163% (Srámek et al., 2000) is another remarkable effect.

These responses, that represent the way the organism defend itself to a so important thermal aggression, are independent on gender, age or physical fitness conditions (Tikuisis et al., 2000; Glickman-Weiss et al., 2000; Wilmore & Costill, 2004). Anthropometry and body composition affect these responses in the way that as small the fatty tissue percentage and the greater the corporal surface, the greater loss of corporal temperature will be (Wilmore & Costill, 2004; Xu et al., 2007) and the greater the body responses will be.

Body benefits associated to this thermal situation can be grouped in to kind of effects:

1) Cold effects “per se”. Temperature reduction slow down all chemical reactions (Zumdahl & Zumdahl, 2006) and specially reactions mediated by enzymes (Nelson & Cox (2004) Nervous system is very affected by this biochemical effect, thus nervous impulse speed can be reduced by 10 times at 12.5°C (Knight, 1976). This effect diminishes muscular tone and pain perception (Cochrane, 2004; Wilcock et al., 2006a; Enwemeka et al., 2002). Also it seems to be the cause of intracellular pH increase detected in this type of immersions (Yanagisawa et al., 2003), because key enzymes catalysis of the glycolysis are reduced. Moreover, some authors (Morton, 2006; Hugh, 2007) indicate that lactate cleanliness increases, which could be another explanatory mechanism of the cryotherapy regenerative effects, although Cheung et all. (2003) indicate that investigations are inconclusive. Terrados & Padilla (2004) recommends cryotherapy as one of the best recovery

agents after maximum intensity exercises, due these are the kind of exercises which generates higher lactate levels.

2) Biological reactions effects (Enwemeka et al., 2002; Yanagisawa et al., 2003; Wilcock et al., 2006a). The main body defence to a great temperature fall is peripheral vessel constriction. As a consequence, the metabolism in those body areas diminishes. Tissue inflammation and edema post-exercise reduces at a great extend, and this, cushions the tissue injury and reduces pain sensation. Also, perspiration diminishes because there is no heat to eliminate.

These two kind of effects are the bases of cryotherapy as a post-effort regenerative method. To these effects must be added one more: water immersion “per se” effects. It is well known that water immersion until hip level provides a degree of hydrostatic pressure enough to generate fluid displacement on the lower limbs (Wilcock et al., 2006a; Llana & Pérez 2008; Goodal & Howatson, 2008) facilitating, therefore the venous return of the legs.

Cryotherapy regenerative effects seem to be especially remarkable when physical work has implied eccentric muscular actions. Thus, reductions on muscular rigidity and on the amount of muscle damages post-exercise have been registered on upper extremities (Eston & Peters, 1999) and on lower extremities (Lane & Wenger, 2004; Yanagisawa et al., 2003). Ruiz et al. (1993) indicated that to enhance post-effort cryotherapy regeneration effects, it is very important to realize exercise of moderate-low intensity after cold water immersions. Nevertheless, Sellwood et al. (2007) didn't find a reduction on muscle damage by using cryotherapy after eccentric efforts in a group of untrained subjects.

On the other hand, Nosaka et al. (2004) applied cryotherapy before an eccentric exercise, and did not find reduction on muscular damage or an increase on muscular performance. Bolster et al. (1999) find an impairment of aerobic capacities immediately after cryotherapy. So, it is concluded that cryotherapy benefits are only achieved when it is used after exercise.

Cryotherapy analgesic effect is reached very fast in time and its effect tends to be transitory since it dissipates gradually after 60 minutes of the immersion (Washington et al., 2000, Wilcock et al., 2006a). Due to the regenerative effects of cryotherapy, muscular and cardiovascular performance increases (Yeargin et al. 2006; Vaile et al. 2007; Peiffer et al. 2008; Vaile et al. 2008) but these exceeds the objectives of the present paper.

Associated risks and contraindications of cryotherapy.

Although the above results are encouraging, cold water immersion is not free of possible associate risks. Although in few individuals, tachycardia and hyperventilation associated to cryotherapy have been reported (Wilcock et al., 2006a). On the other hand, it is not recommended to perform high intensity exercises immediately after cryotherapy because performance is impaired, especially muscular strength and speed movements (Douris et al., 2003; Howard et al., 1994) and the possibility of suffering an injury increases. This is due for three mean reasons. First, cold have a negative effect on the myotatic reflex (Cross et al., 1996) which is a musculoskeletal protector reflex. Second, muscular, tendinose and ligamentose tissues increase their rigidity (stiffness), so flexibility decreases (Evans et al., 1995). Third, anaerobic metabolism is declined due to enzymatic speed reduction (Schniepp et al., 2002).

This reduction in the maximum functional capacity of muscle is transitory and can extend over 15 minutes (Douris et al., 2003) to 20 minutes (Ruiz et al., 1993). In this sense, Patterson et al. (2008) indicated that power will be reduced until 32 minutes, muscular strength until 12 minutes and agility and speed will be reduced until 22 minutes.

Finally it must be considered that few individuals may feel something of pain or discomfort during cryotherapy. Nevertheless, discomfort and pain dissipates gradually after repeated cryotherapy sessions (Carman and Knight, 1992).

Basic criteria to consider on cryotherapy

In order to obtain the cryotheraphy positive effects and to diminish the possible negative effects, it is very important to take into account a correct protocol. But this is not so simple, because there is not a universal protocol accepted for all researchers. So, we present a possible a guide (table 1) based on the most coincident criteria used Wilcock et al. (2006a), Cochrane (2004) y Srámek et al. (2000).

Table 1. Cryotherapy guide based on the most coincident criteria used in literature (Wilcock et al. 2006a; Cochrane, 2004; Srámek et al. 2000).

Temperature	Total immersion time	Immersion time per stance	Considerations
≤15°.	10 minutes	≈30 seg or athlete's capacity to maintain discomfort.	Be careful with subjects with hypertension, hyperventilatory and/or tachycardia.

2. Contrast therapy.

Contrast therapy implies alternative immersions on hot (> 36°C) and cold (< 15°C) water (Wilcock et al., 2006a). The biological basis of contrast bath therapy are the “vaso-pumping”, this means an increase of blood flow due to temperature changes (French et al., 2008;). Morton (2006), Wilcock et al. (2006a) and French et al. (2008) reported significant reductions on blood lactate after an anaerobic intense exercise. These authors indicate tha “vaso-pumping” is the responsible of this effect. Vaile et al. (2007) demonstrated that muscular recovery is faster using contrast bath therapy instead passive recovery. Wilcock et al. (2006a) summarize the benefits as follow: blood flow increase, muscular stiffness reduction, increase on movement amplitude and inflammation and edema reduction.

Criteria to apply contrast bath therapy are very vague. Wilcock et al. (2006a) recommend the next: one session may long from 4 to 30 minutes. Each hot or cold immersion may long from 30 seconds to 300 seconds. Cochrane (2004) indicate that if injury exist, is better to finalize with cold water immersion. Table 2 summarizes criteria (Wilcock et al. 2006a; Cochrane, 2004; Brukner & Khan, 2006).

Table 2. Contrast method summary. From Wilcock et al. (2006a), Cochrane (2004) and Brukner & Khan (2006).

Temperature	Total immersion time	Contrast Time	Considerations
Hot: 37-43°C	4-30 min	3-4 min warm water	Be careful with subjects
Cold: 12-15°C		30-60 seconds in cold water	with hypertension, hyperventilatory and/or tachycardia
			There is not consensus about the recovery effects of this method.

Discussion

The results show to an evident recovery response post-effort of the biological systems after the cryotherapy without negative effects for the health (Eston & Peters, 1999; Lane & Wenger, 2004; Yanegisawa et al., 2003). Nevertheless, in some protocols of intervention where it is applied the cold water immersion immediately after an effort seems to negatively affect the performance of the athlete when it confronts another period of brief effort of high intensity (Schniepp et al., 2002; Crowe et al., 2007). On the neuromuscular capacity after a period of effort and cold water immersion has not been any text on the matter. Nevertheless, it has been reported reductions of manifestations of speed and power when is preceded of cold water immersions (Howard et al., 1994) or reductions of maximal hand-grip strength (Douris et al., 2003).

A noticeable variability in the achieved effects by the cold water immersions exists. These differences in the results can have to the disparity of applied protocols, the two more important are different water temperatures and different immersion time, but different level of water immersion, different modalities of exercise pre-immersion and others. Nevertheless, after this systematic review, it seems to be consensus for cryotherapy to be at 15°C during 10 minutes facilitates post-effort recovery. Regards contrast bath therapy, less information is available and criteria are quite vague.

Van Tubergen and van der Linden (2002), Wilcock et al. (2006a and b) and Srámek et al. (2000) agrees with the potential of immersions as a very effective recovery method. Nevertheless, all they indicated the lack of current research and the necessity to increase it in order to establish good criteria to maximize the positive effects of aquatic immersions. Regards post-effort recovery, it seems to be a tendency towards a greater effectiveness due to water cryotherapy than contrast baths method (Ingram et al., 2008), whereas both methods seem to have equal effectiveness alleviating (milding) muscular stiffness symptoms (Kuligowski et al., 1998).

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