

# Rehabilitation in obstructive sleep apnea: an ignored treatment adjunct

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Key words: OSA, CPAP, rehabilitation, quality of life.

Contributions: AM, PI, VR, SKK, SC, JCS, conceptualization, literature search, writing the original draft of the manuscript, literature search, planning, and editing; PI, review and editing. All the authors have read and agreed with the submitted manuscript. All the authors have made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data for the work; and drafting the work or revising it critically for important intellectual content; and final approval of the version to be published; and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved as per ICMJE guidelines. PI will act as a guarantor on behalf of all authors.

Conflict of interest: the authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

Ethics approval and consent to participate: institute ethics committee clearance was taken vide number IEC/VMMC/SJH/Thesis/November-2015.

Informed consent: written informed consent was obtained from all patients for use of data for research and publication.

Patient consent for publication: written informed consent was obtained from all patients for use of data for research and publication.

Availability of data and materials: available from the corresponding author.

Funding: none.

Received: 3 April 2024.

Accepted: 4 April 2024.

Early view: 7 May 2024.

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Monaldi Archives for Chest Disease 2025; 95:3014

doi: 10.4081/monaldi.2024.3014

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## Abstract

Patients with obstructive sleep apnea (OSA) remain physically inactive during the day, are deconditioned, and have an impaired health-related quality of life (HRQoL). The role of rehabilitation is not yet defined in OSA, despite proven effective modalities for chronic illnesses like chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. In this prospective study, over a period of one year, 30 individuals with sleep-disordered breathing were included. Before recruitment, every patient was receiving continuous positive airway pressure treatment for at least 4 weeks. A statistically significant negative correlation was seen between the Apnea Hypopnea Index and reductions in 6-minute walk distance (6MWD), energy, and general health, which signified that patients with greater levels of daytime sleepiness have poor quality of life and are more deconditioned. Enrolled patients in the study underwent a 20-session rehabilitation program (with a minimum of 2 sessions per week). The patient received resistance and endurance exercises, dietary guidance, and counseling at each session. Before and after rehabilitation, target parameters such as 6MWD, HRQoL domains, the Epworth Sleepiness Scale (ESS), and body mass index (BMI) were recorded. All eight HRQoL domains showed improvement post-rehabilitation. Along with improvements in ESS and BMI, the 6MWD was also improved. No adverse event, such as cardiorespiratory distress, occurred in individuals undergoing rehabilitation. To conclude, rehabilitation is a safe and efficacious modality as an adjunct to positive airway pressure therapy in OSA patients.

## Introduction

Sleep-disordered breathing (SDB) includes several conditions that cause a partial or complete cessation of breathing during sleep, resulting in daytime sleepiness and fatigue that lowers a person's quality of life (QOL) and interferes with their capacity to perform. SDB most commonly manifests as obstructive sleep apnea (OSA), which is linked to several additional detrimental health effects, such as an elevated mortality risk [1]. For treating OSA, positive airway pressure (PAP) therapy is considered the gold standard. Adherence to the device is necessary for therapy to be effective. Adherence barriers include mask discomfort, nasal congestion, local irritation, and claustrophobia. These obstacles make it difficult to maintain efficacy over the long term, which results in poor performance and repeated symptoms during the day [2].

Deconditioning is defined as the loss of physical fitness due to the inability to maintain a required level of activity or training. Patients with SDB are prone to deconditioning due to engaging in less physical activity during the daytime, due to a combination of factors such as obesity, excessive daytime sleepiness, and weariness. Comorbidities like depression, cognitive impairment, and mood changes further contribute to deconditioning by reducing

activity levels [2]. The symptoms and comorbidities of OSA, such as diabetes, affect a person's physical, mental, and social well-being. These patients are more likely to experience reduced QOL [3].

Due to their obesity, excessive daytime sleepiness, and sedentary lifestyles, which further decondition them, OSA patients have restricted functional capacity, impaired health-related QOL (HRQoL), and limited daytime activity. This results in a vicious cycle that exacerbates OSA by depressing the patient further and causing gradual weight gain, muscular dysfunction, and negative psychosocial effects [4].

Engaging in physical activity has a substantial positive impact on vigor and certain aspects of QOL by reducing depressed symptoms and weariness. Increased physical activity during rehabilitation will break the vicious cycle of deconditioning in people with OSA and serve as a crucial supplement to PAP therapy [5].

A rehabilitation program consists of education, exercise, and support to assist patients learn how to breathe and operate as best they can. It entails following an organized curriculum under expert supervision. Patients receive nutritional guidance and counselling in addition to engaging in resistance and endurance exercises. It has been successful in restoring deconditioning and raising the QOL in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and heart failure patients [6]. There is a paucity of literature on HRQoL in patients with OSA. Besides, there are no consensus guidelines on rehabilitation in OSA.

## Materials and Methods

A pre- and post-interventional study was conducted on OSA patients who were attending the Department of Pulmonary, Critical Care, and Sleep Medicine's sleep clinic. Deconditioning or impaired HRQoL was screened for all patients (18-65 years old) with polysomnography-diagnosed OSA who were on PAP therapy for 4 weeks and willing to engage in a rehabilitation program. A patient was considered deconditioned if their 6-minute walk distance (6MWD) was less than 80% of what was expected to be normal. The 36-Item Short Form Health Survey (SF-36) was used to calculate the HRQoL in eight domains: physical function, bodily pain, role limitation due to physical problems, general health perceptions, social function, emotional well-being, role limitation due to emotional problems, and energy/fatigue. The study included patients with deconditioning and/or reduced HRQOL. Patients with uncontrolled congestive heart failure, uncontrolled hypertension, angina, critical aortic stenosis, cognitive impairment, and refusal to engage in the trial were excluded from the study.

An Alice 6 LDX (Philips Respironics, Pennsylvania, USA) polysomnography machine was used to diagnose OSA. Spirometry was done using the Medisoft Spiro Air system (Medisoft, Sorinnes, Belgium). The EN-Motion treadmill (Enraf-Nonius, Netherlands), Motomed Viva 2 cycle ergometer (RECK-Technik GmbH & Co., Germany), and Biodex Arm Ergometer (Biodex Medical Systems, Inc., New York, USA) were used for endurance training.

Consecutive OSA patients who visited the sleep clinic were assessed for deconditioning and reduced HRQoL. In addition to PAP treatment, patients had 20 sessions of thorough rehabilitation spaced out over a minimum of 8 weeks.

The three primary components of the rehabilitation program were diet, exercise (both resistance and endurance training), and counseling with education [7]. Aerobic activities for the upper and lower limbs were used in endurance training. For the upper limb arm, an ergometer was used initially with minimum resistance at 50

rpm for about 4-6 minutes. Exercise duration and intensity were gradually raised to a total of 15 minutes per session based on the patient's tolerance. Based on the preferences of the patients, either a cycle ergometer or a treadmill was used for lower limb training. For the first 20 minutes of the activity, the pace was set at 2 km/h. To a maximum of 60 minutes each session (since the effect peaks after this time), the duration and intensity of exercise were increased based on the patient's tolerance. For the major group of muscles, such as the biceps and triceps in the upper limb, the quadriceps, and the calf muscles for the lower limb, resistance training was performed. Using weights, 2-4 sets of 10-15 repetitions were performed to develop the biceps and triceps in the upper limb. Each set of weights was customized, and they were increased as soon as tolerance allowed. There was at least a 48-hour break between each session. Resistance training for the lower limbs included utilizing weights to strengthen the quadriceps and calves, with each set consisting of ten to fifteen repetitions. Individual weights were used, and when each set was finished with tolerance, the weights were increased. There was a minimum of 48 hours between each session.

Using a pulse oximeter, heart rate and peripheral oxygen saturation were recorded during exercise. Patients achieved a target heart rate, which is equivalent to 80% of their maximum heart rate, where their maximum heart rate is (220-age). Before each exercise session, there was a five-minute warm-up and a five-minute cool-down. Every exercise session included counselling on lifestyle adjustment, quitting smoking, maintaining good sleep hygiene, and adhering to PAP treatment. Seminars were utilized to impart knowledge about the OSA. For a detailed food plan, each patient was referred to our college's diet department.

## Statistical analysis

At baseline and after 20 rehabilitation sessions, the following data were recorded: 6MWD, HRQoL (SF-36), Apnea Hypopnea Index (AHI), Epworth Sleepiness Scale (ESS), body mass index (BMI), and pulmonary functions [forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1) and forced vital capacity (FVC)]. Overall, 30 patients who completed a structured rehabilitation program were included in the analysis. Numbers and percentages (%) were used to represent categorical data, whereas mean  $\pm$  standard deviation and median were used to represent continuous variables. The paired *t*-test/Wilcoxon rank sum test was used to compare the two points of view. AHI was correlated with several characteristics using the Spearman rank correlation coefficient, and *p*-values less than 0.05 were regarded as statistically significant.

## Results

Patients included in the study belonged to age groups ranging from 27 to 69 years. The mean age was  $52.63 \pm 8.97$  years. A total of 12 male and 18 female patients were included in the study. The patients' mean BMI was  $35.62 \pm 4.73$  kg/m<sup>2</sup>, irrespective of sex, indicating an obese population. The study's mean AHI score was  $34.6 \pm 13.47$ , irrespective of sex, indicating severe OSA. In terms of co-morbid conditions, 11 people had diabetes mellitus and 12 had hypertension. Patients' mean ESS ranged from 12 to  $11.77 \pm 2.57$ .

In all 30 patients, the 6MWD was reduced when compared to their calculated expected values. A decrease of  $46.22 \pm 32.63\%$  and a median value of 44.36% were observed.

All eight parameters of HRQoL showed a significant reduction in their mean values. In the results, there was a trend towards a higher percentage reduction in 6MWD in patients with severe OSA

when compared to moderate OSA. Among all eight HRQoL parameters, the scores were lower in the severe OSA group when compared to the moderate OSA group, and the p-value was statistically

significant in the domains of energy, general health, and role limitation physical health ( $p<0.05$ ). Low scores in eight domains also indicated a poor HRQoL. Table 1 shows the eight HRQoL parameters in 30 patients.

A significant p-value was found for the positive correlation between the percentage reduction in 6MWD and the AHI (correlation coefficient 0.441,  $p=0.0147$ ). Among HRQoL parameters, there was a negative correlation for general health, energy, emotional well-being, role limitation emotional health, role limitation physical health, and social functioning, but this was statistically significant for domains of energy and general health only ( $p<0.05$ ). Table 2 represents the correlation of AHI with 6MWD and HRQoL.

Following rehabilitation, 6MWD, HRQoL parameters, and ESS showed statistically significant improvements ( $p<0.005$ ). No significant reduction was seen in heart rate, blood pressure, FEV1, or FVC were significantly decreased. Table 3 represents the effect of rehabilitation on 6MWD, HRQoL, and ESS.

A statistically significant positive correlation (correlation

**Table 1.** Eight parameters of health-related quality of life.

Parameter	Mean±SD	Range
Physical function	40.67±9.17	25-65
Role limitation physical health	28.33±21.51	0-75
Role limitation emotional health	23.1±23.17	0-66
Energy/fatigue	34.83±14.23	15-80
Emotional well-being	46.8±12.78	20-72
Social functioning	43.5±16.81	13-75
Bodily pain	39.53±12.84	13-68
General health	35.6±13.99	20-70

SD, standard deviation.

**Table 2.** Correlation of Apnea Hypopnea Index with health-related quality of life and 6-minute walk distance.

		AHI
Percentage reduction 6MWD	Correlation coefficient	0.441
	p	0.0147
Emotional well-being	Correlation coefficient	-0.286
	p	0.125
Energy	Correlation coefficient	-0.604
	p	0.0004
General health	Correlation coefficient	-0.372
	p	0.0429
Pain	Correlation coefficient	0.046
	p	0.8084
Physical function	Correlation coefficient	0.016
	p	0.9317
Role limitation emotional health	Correlation coefficient	-0.262
	p	0.1627
Role limitation physical health	Correlation coefficient	-0.338
	p	0.0675
Social functioning	Correlation coefficient	-0.151
	p	0.4269

AHI, Apnea Hypopnea Index; HRQoL, health-related quality of life; 6MWD, 6-minute walk distance.

**Table 3.** Pre- and post-rehabilitation comparison for 6-minute walk distance, health-related quality of life, Epworth Sleepiness Scale, and body mass index.

Parameter	Pre-rehabilitation (Mean±SD)	Post-rehabilitation (Mean±SD)	p
Epworth Sleepiness Scale	11.77±2.57	7.47±1.81	<0.001
6MWD	724.2±152.64	819±127.03	<0.001
Physical function	40.67±9.17	64.5±10.7	<0.001
Role limitation physical health	28.33±21.51	55±19.03	<0.001
Role limitation emotional health	23.1±23.17	46.4±27.09	<0.001
Energy	34.83±14.23	55.87±11.78	<0.001
Emotional well-being	46.8±12.78	64.07±16.24	<0.001
Social function	43.5±16.81	63.53±15.58	<0.001
Pain	39.53±12.84	66.3±10.8	<0.001
General health	35.6±13.99	57.67±9.44	<0.001
Body mass index	35.62±4.73	33.65±4.42	<0.001

SD, standard deviation; ESS, Epworth Sleepiness Scale; 6MWD, 6-minute walk distance; HRQoL, health-related quality of life; BMI, body mass index.

coefficient: 0.338,  $p=0.0341$ ) was seen between AHI and the improvement in 6MWD. Among improvements in HRQoL parameters, all showed a positive correlation with AHI, and it was statistically significant for general health (correlation coefficient: 0.436,  $p<0.05$ ) and role limitation physical health (correlation coefficient: 0.455,  $p<0.05$ ). Table 4 represents the correlation between improvement in 6MWD and HRQoL parameters with AHI.

## Discussion

Dyspnea, obesity, excessive daytime drowsiness, sadness, and anxiety are common in patients with SDB. As a result, they experience fatigue, which makes them less active, which degrades their QOL and deconditions them. A vicious cycle of increasing weight gain, muscular dysfunction, worsening OSA, and deconditioning results from all of this, further impairing quality-of-life areas.

According to our study, 6MWD and HRQoL domains were decreased with values that were below anticipated for every patient who was recruited. This implies that OSA patients are deconditioned and have an impaired QOL across all domains. In a similar previous study, when 6MWD was measured in 151 obese patients with severe OSA, Plywaczewski *et al.* showed that it was considerably lower in these individuals when compared to comparable healthy control participants [8].

Our study found that patients with severe disease have more EDS, dyspnea, and hence are more deconditioned and have poorer HRQoL. This finding was similar to a study by Lopez *et al.* [9], who found that excessive sleepiness and lack of physical activity affected the QOL of apneic patients; this effect was worse among sleepy non-physically active subjects and worsened with increasing severity in the group with severe SDB.

A statistically significant weak positive correlation was seen between AHI and 6MWD ( $p<0.05$ ). This shows that the higher the AHI, the higher the level of deconditioning in these patients. There was a weak negative correlation between all HRQoL parameters and AHI, which was statistically significant for the energy and gen-

eral health domains. According to this, individuals with higher AHI scores may also have more comorbid conditions, such as anxiety and depression, pain, drowsiness, dyspnea, and cognitive issues. As a result, individuals experience more fatigue and a poorer perception of their QOL.

The positive impact of rehabilitation on deconditioning and HRQoL has been assessed in several chronic illnesses, such as COPD and congestive heart failure, when employed as an adjunct to standard therapy [10,11]. In our study, the effect of rehabilitation on 6MWD and HRQoL domains was evaluated in OSA patients. We found a statistically significant increase ( $p<0.005$ ) in 6MWD for all individuals along with a decrease in ESS and BMI. This result showed that patients who got both PAP therapy and rehabilitation as part of their OSA treatment saw an improvement in their degree of deconditioning. These results were similar to the study conducted by Sengul *et al.* [12], which demonstrated the beneficial effects of rehabilitation on excessive daytime sleepiness and BMI in individuals with OSA.

Muscle training, decreased obesity, decreased daytime sleepiness, and greater motivation for these individuals may have contributed to the enhanced 6MWD, decreased deconditioning, and higher exercise capacity. These findings were significant because higher 6MWD in these individuals will enhance their level of physical activity and aid in the continued reduction of their deconditioning.

In our study, each domain of HRQoL (physical function, role limitation due to physical problems, bodily pain, general health perceptions, social function, emotional well-being, role limitation due to emotional problems, and energy/fatigue), measured with SF-36 questionnaire, showed a statistically significant improvement ( $p<0.005$ ). This finding was consistent with a study conducted by Norman *et al.* that evaluated the effect of exercise training on the physical and subjective aspects of patients with OSA [13]. The study demonstrated a significant improvement in HRQoL during the post-exercise interval. In a similar study, Kline *et al.* used standardized questionnaires to examine the efficacy of exercise training on QOL, mood, functional impairment from sleepiness, and daytime functioning [14]. This study found that physical function, vital-

**Table 4.** Correlation between improvement in 6-minute walk distance and health-related quality of life with Apnea Hypopnea Index.

Parameter	AHI
Percentage improvement 6MWD	Correlation coefficient 0.388
	p 0.0341
Emotional well-being	Correlation coefficient 0.348
	p 0.0598
Energy	Correlation coefficient 0.339
	p 0.0668
General health	Correlation coefficient 0.436
	p 0.0161
Pain	Correlation coefficient -0.322
	p 0.0827
Physical function	Correlation coefficient 0.131
	p 0.8693
Role limitation emotional health	Correlation coefficient 0.131
	p 0.4892
Role limitation physical health	Correlation coefficient 0.455
	p 0.0114
Social functioning	Correlation coefficient 0.093
	p 0.625

6MWD, 6-minute walk distance; HRQoL, health-related quality of life; AHI, apnea-hypopnea index.



ity, and mental health were significantly improved with exercise training, and all SF-36 subscales showed small to moderate gains after exercise training as compared to the control group.

Exercise's proven antidepressant benefits are widely known. The two most common mental health conditions seen in individuals with OSA are anxiety and depression. Numerous studies have indicated that exercise therapy might be an effective non-pharmacologic treatment for OSA patients' anxiety and depressive symptoms. This leads to the improvement in the HRQoL domains of role restriction and emotional well-being due to emotional health, as seen in our study [14-16]. A patient's social functioning and overall health perception both increase as his physical and mental well-being do, which results in improvement in these domains. A statistically significant positive ( $p<0.005$ ) correlation was found between AHI and improvement in 6MWD. This suggests that patients with higher AHI and sleepiness during the day showed more improvement. Among improvements in HRQoL domains, all showed a positive correlation, which was statistically significant ( $p<0.005$ ) for general health and role limitation physical health. This suggested that post-rehabilitation patients with higher AHI had a better perception of their general health.

Rehabilitating a patient with OSA is safe. During their rehabilitation, none of our patients had any severe cardio-respiratory discomfort, such as chest pain or exercise-induced hypertension. Following rehabilitation, all eight parameters of health-related QOL have shown a significant improvement. By lowering their BMI, improving their muscle strength, and decreasing their level of daytime sleepiness, rehabilitation also lowers the degree of deconditioning. Our study suggests that, when used as an adjunct to PAP therapy, rehabilitation can be a useful and safe technique. Nonetheless, more research with a larger sample size is necessary to determine its function and establish it as a standard procedure.

## Conclusions

According to the study's findings, even with continuous PAP treatment, individuals with OSA are deconditioned and have poor HRQoL. Rehabilitation is a safe modality and well tolerated by most patients with SDB. Rehabilitation can act as an adjunct to standard PAP therapy to improve quality of life, deconditioning, and daytime sleepiness in patients with SDB. However, further studies using a larger sample size and a longer time frame are necessary to assess its role further and establish it as a standard of practice.

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