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Effect of cold indoor environment on physical performance of older women living in the community

ULRICH LINDEMANN1, JUHA OKSA2, DAWN A. SKELTON3, NINA BEYER4, JOCHEN KLENK1,5, JULIA ZSCHEILE1, CLEMENS BECKER1

1Department of Clinical Gerontology and Rehabilitation, Robert-Bosch-Hospital, Auerbachstr. 110, Stuttgart 70376, Germany
2Physical Work Capacity Team, Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Oulu, Finland
3Institute of Applied Health Research, Glasgow Caledonian University, Glasgow, UK
4Musculoskeletal Rehabilitation Research Unit, Bispebjerg and Frederiksberg Hospitals, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark
5Institute of Epidemiology, Ulm University, Ulm, Germany

Address correspondence to: Ulrich Lindemann. Tel: (49) 711 81012231; Fax: (49) 711 81016116. Email: ulrich.lindemann@rbk.de

Abstract

Background: the effects of cold on older persons’ body and mind are not well documented, but with an increased number of older people with decreasing physical performance, these possible effects need to be understood.
Objective: to investigate the effect of cold indoor environment on physical performance of older women. 

Design: cross-sectional experimental study with two test conditions. 

Setting: movement laboratory in a climate chamber. 

Subjects: eighty-eight community-dwelling, cognitively unimpaired older women (mean age 78 years). 

Methods: participants were exposed to moderately cold (15°C) and warm/normal (25°C) temperature in a climate chamber in random order with an interval of 1 week. The assessment protocol included leg extensor power (Nottingham Power Rig), sit-to-stand performance velocity (linear encoder), gait speed, walk-ratio (i.e. step length/cadence on an instrumented walk way), maximal quadriceps and hand grip strength. 

Results: physical performance was lower in 15°C room temperature compared with 25°C room temperature for leg extensor power ($P < 0.0001$), sit-to-stand performance velocity ($P < 0.0001$), gait speed ($P < 0.0001$), walk-ratio ($P = 0.016$) and maximal quadriceps strength ($P = 0.015$), but not for hand grip strength. 

Conclusion: in healthy older women a moderately cold indoor environment decreased important physical performance measures necessary for independent living. 

Keywords: older women, cold indoor environment, physical performance, older people 

Introduction 

There is evidence from British studies that poor older people threaten their health status by reducing expenditures on heating cost and electricity [1]. Most of this work has been performed in the UK with poor heating conditions in the 1980s. An increased morbidity among older people dwelling in colder homes has been shown [2] most likely associated with thermal indoor conditions. 

Epidemiological studies have found excess mortality in older persons who have been exposed to heat waves and cold temperatures [3, 4]. Furthermore, there is some evidence of an association between low outdoor temperature and falls [5], but there are no results regarding indoor temperature. 

Very few studies have examined the thermoregulation in older persons in response to exposure to cold temperatures. Failure to maintain core temperature during exposure to a cold environment [6] is explained by a higher level of skin thermal conduction [7] and by reduced reflex vasoconstriction [8]. 

The ability to quickly produce sufficient muscle force is of paramount importance for controlling body movements. In general, explosive muscle power decreases with age [9]. In older people decreased muscle power is associated with functional limitations [10, 11] and has been identified as an important determinant of mobility skills [12]. Oksa et al. [13] showed that a relatively low level of decrease in room temperature was sufficient to decrease muscle performance in young persons. Skelton et al. [14] found a 26% reduction in leg extension power of young subjects after cooling down the muscles by immersion into 15°C cold water. Indeed, poor explosive power performance may be more indicative of falls risk than traditional strength measurements in older people [15]. However, no studies have investigated muscle power and physical performance during exposure to cold indoor environment in older persons. 

The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of cold indoor environment on physical performance of women 70 years or older. We hypothesised that there would be a deterioration in physical performance during exposure to an indoor cold environment. 

Methods 

Subjects and design 

Eighty-eight community-dwelling women, 70 years or older, participated in this cross-sectional, experimental study with two test conditions (25°C versus 15°C room temperature). Exclusion criteria were (i) persons not able to follow instructions, (ii) the presence of uncontrolled cardiac illness, (iii) functional relevant disease, which significantly influences walking performance or leg extension and (iv) terminal illness. All the participants gave written informed consent. The study was approved by the ethical committee of the local university. 

Primary outcome 

Muscle power (force × velocity) of the lower limbs was assessed using the Nottingham power rig [16]. In a seated position, the participants were instructed to push with a single leg against a plate. After 1 sub-maximal trial of each leg, the maximum results of the left and right leg power of three trials each were summed. 

Secondary outcomes 

Sit-to-stand performance velocity was measured using a linear encoder (MuscleLab Power model MLPRO, Ergotest Technology, Langesund, Norway) fixed at the person’s hip. 

Walking performance was assessed on an instrumented walkway (GAITRite®, CIR Systems, Havertown, PA, USA) with normal, slow and fast speed in order to calculate step length and cadence adjusted to gait speed [17, 18]. The use of walking aids was allowed. Maximum gait speed (m/s) and
Effect of cold indoor environment on physical performance

The Short Physical Performance Battery (SPPB) is used to assess physical performance. The protocol for the SPPB is presented in Appendix S1. Habitual gait speed and gait speed while wearing a walking aid were used for analysis. The walk-ratio (step length/cadence) was also used to assess physical performance.

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Procedure
Participants were exposed to moderately cold (15°C) and normal/warm (25°C) temperature in a climate chamber 45 min before assessment and during all measurements. Both conditions were assessed in random order with an interval of 1 week. Clothing was standardised (thin pullover, thin long trousers). Before and between measurements, the participants were instructed to rest to avoid internal heat production by leg muscle activity.

Statistics
The study sample size was designed to provide 80% power to detect a 10% difference between test conditions. The Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to ascertain normal distribution. Paired samples t-test was used to show differences between both test conditions (15 versus 25°C). The significance level of all statistical procedures was set to α = 5% (two-sided). All analyses were conducted using the SPSS version 16 software (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA).

Results
No injuries or adverse events occurred during the tests due to exposure to the cold test condition. The descriptive parameters of the cohort are included in Table 1. The maximum score of the SPPB was reached by 59% of the women; 39% had an optimum score in the SOMC test; co-morbidity was present in 92% of the women; 14% used a walking aid; 40% reported at least one fall in the previous 12 months. None of the women fulfilled three or more frailty criteria (two criteria 5%, one criterion 17%).

During exposure to the cold indoor environment mean skin temperature at the shank decreased from 31.9 °C (SD: 1.59°C) to 28.6°C (SD: 1.54°C). In general, physical performance was lower in cold compared with normal/warm room temperature (Table 2). The decrease of physical performance ranged from 2 to 10% with only hand grip strength being unaffected by the cold temperature.

Discussion
The results of this study confirm our hypothesis that physical performance in older women is reduced in a cold environment. Although skin temperature was lower in the cold test condition, some older people have little perception of differences between temperatures and are unlikely to perceive they are getting colder and put on more clothes [24]. So, although we did not offer them the ability to put on an extra layer of clothes to counteract the cold environment, they would not necessarily have done so.

The amount of decrease in performance was comparable with that reported in a study investigating drop jumps in young persons [13] but lower than reported in the studies using water immersion [14, 25]. We used a climate chamber because the ecological validity of this method appears to be higher than the application of ice or immersion into cold water.

Although the decrease of performance was relatively small, it appeared after only 45 min. Especially in frail persons, longer exposure may result in clinically relevant differences because reduced muscle power is related to mobility limitation and decreased functional performance [10, 26, 27], balance problems [28] and falls risk [15]. In addition, muscle power is more strongly related to functional performance than muscle strength [10, 26]. Furthermore, walk-ratio, which was also negatively affected by the cold environment, has also been shown to be associated with risk of falling [29]. Thus, a cold room temperature may increase the risk of falling in older women. Nevertheless, women with a wide range of performance levels were included in our study, as documented by an expected percentage of fallers and some users of walking aids,

Table 1. Description of all (n = 88) participants, assessed at 25°C ambient temperature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description of all</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Minimum-maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age (years)</td>
<td>78.0</td>
<td>5.69</td>
<td>70-95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Height (cm)</td>
<td>159.6</td>
<td>6.50</td>
<td>145-174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight (kg)</td>
<td>68.5</td>
<td>11.97</td>
<td>44-102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body mass index (kg/m²)</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>17.2-38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habitual gait speed (m/s)</td>
<td>1.10</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>0.49-1.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPPB (0–12)</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>1.95</td>
<td>4–12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-morbidity (0–18)</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>1.57</td>
<td>0–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOMC (0–28)</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>0–10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SPPB, Short Physical Performance Battery; Co-morbidity assessed by the Functional Co-morbidity Index; SOMC, Short Orientation Memory Concentration test; better score values are underlined.
Thermal conditions should be recorded and standardised. Falls risk may be increased in a cold indoor environment. A moderately cold indoor environment decreased physical performance in community-dwelling older women. The results of the study indicate that observational and intervention studies with repeated measurements of motor function should record and standardise thermal conditions. This could be explained by the fact that before and during assessments the use of hands/arms was not restricted, whereas the use of legs was restricted to avoid heat production by muscle activity.

The present study has several strengths and limitations that should be addressed. Strengths include the fairly large sample and the standardised measurement procedures. Limitations include the convenience sampling of non-frail women aged 70–95, which means that results cannot be generalised to men and to women younger than 70 years.

In conclusion, a moderately cold indoor environment decreased physical performance in community-dwelling older women. The results of the study indicate that observational and intervention studies with repeated measurements of motor function should record and standardise thermal conditions. To answer the question, ‘which is the best environment temperature for optimal physical performance in older people?’, future studies should include frail men and women with a wider range of cognition to be assessed under several thermal test conditions.

**Key points**

- A moderately cold indoor environment decreased physical performance in community-dwelling older women in only 45 min.
- Falls risk may be increased in a cold indoor environment because of an altered walking pattern and a decrease in lower limb strength and power.
- Thermal conditions should be recorded and standardised when performing observational and intervention studies with repeated measurements of motor function in older women.

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**References**


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Functional decline of older patients 1 year after cardiothoracic surgery followed by intensive care admission: a prospective longitudinal cohort study

Annerike C. Govers¹, Bianca M. Buurman¹, Peter Jue², Bas A. J. M. de Mol³, Dave A. Dongelmanns⁴, Sophia E. de Rooij¹

¹Section of Geriatric Medicine, Department of Internal Medicine, Academic Medical Center, PO Box 22660, Amsterdam 1100 DD, The Netherlands  
²Department of Geriatrics, Rijnland Ziekenhuis, Leiderdorp, The Netherlands  
³Department of Cardiothoracic Surgery, Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
⁴Department of Intensive Care, Academic Medical Center, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Address correspondence to: Bianca M. Buurman. Tel: +31 205665991; Fax: +31 205669325. Email: b.m.vanes@amc.uva.nl

Abstract

Background: there is a growing demand for cardiothoracic surgery in patients’ aged ≥65 years. 
Objective: to explore which variables were independently associated with functional decline 12 months after cardiothoracic surgery followed by intensive care admission.