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Aswathi T P
Aswathi T P, MPT, Lecturer, Dr MV Shetty College of Physiotherapy, Manglore, Karnataka, India.

Amin Divya Padmanabha
Lecturer, Dr MV Shetty College of Physiotherapy, Manglore, Karnataka, India.

Shabana T S
Shabana T S, BPT, Dr MV Shetty College of Physiotherapy, Manglore, Karnataka, India.

Correspondence:
Aswathi T P
Aswathi T P, MPT, Lecturer, Dr MV Shetty College of Physiotherapy, Manglore, Karnataka, India.

"Evaluating The Impact of High-Tech Robotic Physiotherapy Interventions on Recovery Outcomes in Young Adults with Stroke: - A Literature Review"

Aswathi T P, Amin Divya Padmanabha, Shabana T S

Abstract

Objective: This literature review seeks to assess the effectiveness and safety of advanced robotic physiotherapy interventions for young adults with stroke-related disorders. By analysing existing research, it aims to determine how these technologies affect motor recovery, functional independence, and overall quality of life, while also identifying gaps in the current literature and suggesting potential areas for future research**. Methods:** A systematic review was conducted using PubMed, Scopus, and Google Scholar to identify studies on high-tech robotic physiotherapy for young adults with stroke. Relevant randomized controlled trials and cohort studies were chosen, with a focus on intervention types and outcomes such as motor recovery and functional independence. **Results:** The results indicate that robotic-assisted rehabilitation significantly improves motor function, strength, and independence in stroke patients, especially for upper limb recovery, with notable improvements in Fugl-Meyer Assessment (FMA-UE) and Motricity Index (MI) scores. However, no significant changes were found in pain levels or long-term quality of life, suggesting that further research is needed to explore long-term benefits and optimize treatment strategies. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, robotic-assisted rehabilitation effectively improves motor function and independence in stroke patients. However, challenges in pain management and quality of life persist, highlighting the need for further research on long-term effects and integration with other therapies to enhance outcomes.

Keywords: High tech Robotic interventions, Stroke recovery, young adults, Motor function, Neurorehabilitation.

Introduction

A stroke, also known as a brain attack or cerebrovascular accident (CVA), is a medical emergency that occurs when blood flow to the brain is interrupted. This disruption can result from a burst blood vessel or a clot that blocks the blood supply, leading to damage or death of brain tissue. Strokes are highly life-threatening, and survivors may experience vision or speech loss, paralysis, and confusion[1]. There are two main types of strokes: ischemic and hemorrhagic. An ischemic stroke occurs when a blockage in the blood vessels prevents the brain from receiving oxygen and nutrients, causing brain cells to die within minutes. A hemorrhagic stroke happens when there is sudden bleeding in the brain, which increases pressure on brain cells and causes damage. Nearly 90% of strokes are ischemic, while the remaining 10% are hemorrhagic[2]. Strokes are further categorized based on the location of the blockage or bleeding in the brain[3].

Stroke is increasingly being recognized as a major health issue among young adults, a group historically considered to be at low risk. Recent epidemiological studies reveal a concerning rise in stroke incidence among individuals aged 18 to 50, driven by factors such as hypertension, obesity, substance abuse, and lifestyle-related conditions [4]. The consequences of stroke in this population are often severe, resulting in long-term disabilities that significantly impact daily activities, independence, and overall quality of life. As stroke incidence patterns shift, there is an urgent need for innovative rehabilitation strategies designed to address the unique challenges faced by young stroke survivors.

Advancements in robotic technology have paved the way for new possibilities in rehabilitation. Robotic rehabilitation systems deliver precise, repeatable, and customizable therapeutic interventions tailored to the specific needs of patients [5]. These systems not only offer physical support during rehabilitation exercises but also boost motivation through engaging and interactive therapy[6]. Research indicates that intensive, task-specific training facilitated by robotic devices plays a crucial role in promoting neural recovery and enhancing functional outcomes.

This research aims to systematically examine the effectiveness of novel robotic techniques in the rehabilitation of young adults following a stroke. It will assess the impact of these interventions on functional recovery, mobility, and overall quality of life[7]. By combining quantitative evaluations of motor function with qualitative insights into patient experiences, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of both the benefits and challenges of robotic rehabilitation. Ultimately, the findings could influence clinical practices, leading to new treatment protocols that harness technological advancements to enhance recovery and improve the quality of life for young stroke survivors. In doing so, this research seeks to address the growing burden of stroke in this vulnerable population, highlighting the vital role of innovative solutions in contemporary rehabilitation.

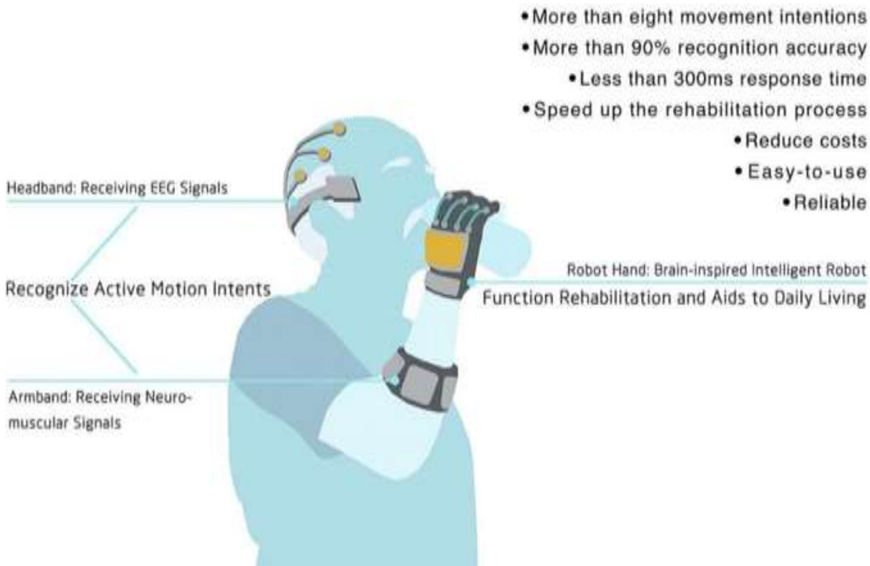

Fig.1: Stroke Rehabilitation robot.

Methodology

The *objective* of this study is to explore the efficacy of high-tech robotic physiotherapy interventions in young adults with stroke, focusing on rehabilitation outcomes and patient performance.

The inclusion criteria for this research include adults aged 18 or older who have been diagnosed with subacute stroke (within 6 months post-stroke) and demonstrate motor impairments in the upper or lower extremities. The study design includes randomized controlled trials (RCTs), pilot studies, and clinical trials with pre- and post-intervention evaluations.

The exclusion criteria involve studies with patients who have severe cognitive impairments or non-stroke-related neurological disorders. Research that focuses solely on chronic stroke patients (more than 6 months post-stroke) or paediatric populations will also be excluded. Additionally, case reports, abstracts, conference papers, and non-peer-reviewed articles are not included, nor are studies that lack detailed clinical outcome data or fail to provide statistical analysis of pre- and post-treatment results. Only studies published up to October 2023 are considered.

A *comprehensive* search was conducted across several databases, including MEDLINE, EMBASE, CENTRAL, and CINAHL, as well as ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and the Cochrane Library, up until November 2019. The search terms used included combinations of "robotic rehabilitation," "stroke," "upper limb," "gait training," "motor function," and "randomized controlled trials." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were applied to refine the results, and the search was limited to English-language publications.

Interventions in the studies include the use of robotic devices for rehabilitation, specifically targeting upper limb therapy or gait training. These robotic therapies are compared to conventional rehabilitation methods or control groups to assess their relative effectiveness. The robotic interventions typically involve advanced technologies designed to assist in motor recovery, offering precise, repetitive movements that aim to improve function, mobility, and strength. Comparisons are made between these robotic rehabilitation approaches and traditional therapies, which may include physical exercises, manual therapy, or other standard rehabilitation protocols. The goal is to evaluate whether robotic devices provide superior or complementary benefits in improving patient outcomes, such as motor function, independence, and overall quality of life. Additionally, the studies may explore how robotic rehabilitation could address specific challenges in stroke recovery that traditional methods might not fully resolve.

Outcomes: Studies reporting at least one of the following outcomes: motor function (FMA-UE), strength (Motricity Index), autonomy in daily activities (modified Barthel Index, FIM), pain levels (Numeric Rating Scale), gait speed, endurance, balance (Berg Balance Scale), and Functional Ambulation Classification.

The *study selection process* involved two independent reviewers who first screened the titles and abstracts of the articles to identify studies that were potentially relevant. Full-text articles were then assessed to determine their eligibility according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Any disagreements between the reviewers were resolved through discussion or by consulting a third reviewer. The selection process was visually represented using a PRISMA flow diagram.

Data extraction was carried out independently by two reviewers using a standardized form. The information collected included details about the study design, sample size, and characteristics of the participants. The reviewers also gathered information on the intervention, including the type of robotic device used, as well as the duration and frequency of the therapy sessions. Outcome measures reported in the studies were also extracted, such as the FMA-UE, Motricity Index, mBI, NRS, ARAT, FIM, gait speed, Berg Balance Scale, FAC, and TUG scores. Additionally, pre- and post-treatment data for each group were recorded. The statistical methods used in the studies, including t-tests, Poisson regression, and sensitivity analysis, were also documented. Finally, any adverse events reported in the studies were noted.

Limitations

1. Heterogeneity of Interventions: The studies included in the systematic review and meta-analysis used different types of robotic devices, intervention protocols, and outcome measures, which may contribute to variability in results.
2. Small Sample Sizes: Some of the included studies, especially pilot studies, had small sample sizes, limiting the generalizability of the findings.
3. Publication Bias: The review relied on published studies, and there may be a risk of publication bias, particularly with regard to positive outcomes of robotic therapy.
4. Short Follow-Up Period: Most studies focused on short-term outcomes, with limited data on the long-term effects of robotic rehabilitation on stroke recovery.
5. Language Limitation: Only English-language studies were included, which may have excluded relevant research published in other languages.

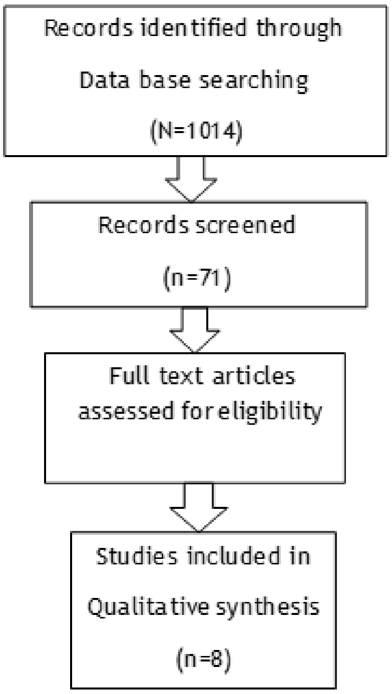

Fig 2: Search strategy.

In this study, the initial database search identified a total of 1,014 records. A systematic screening process was then implemented, applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria at each stage to refine the dataset. This led to the review of 71 records, which were further assessed for relevance to the specific focus on young adults and robotics. Although 15 full-text articles initially appeared to meet the criteria, some faced accessibility issues due to paywalls. As a result, only 8 studies could be included in the qualitative synthesis, as they met the established eligibility requirements. This final set of 8 studies provided a comprehensive overview of the topic and served as the foundation for the subsequent quantitative analysis, ensuring that the findings were both robust and aligned with the study's objectives. Through this meticulous selection process, the research aimed to offer valuable insights into the intersection of robotics and rehabilitation for young adults.

Methods Summary: The study involved 81 patients with subacute stroke outcomes, who were divided into two groups: 32 participants in the experimental group, receiving robotic rehabilitation, and 49 participants in the pilot group, with treatment tailored to individual clinical needs. Both groups participated in a 30-session upper limb rehabilitation program using robotic devices, aimed at enhancing motor function, strength, and independence in daily activities.

Evaluations included the Fugl-Meyer Assessment for Upper Extremity (FMA-UE) to assess motor function, the Motricity Index (MI) for muscle strength, and the modified Barthel Index (mBI) to measure autonomy in daily activities. Pain levels were monitored using the Numeric Rating Scale (NRS).

Additionally, the RESTORE Pilot Study involved 19 patients, with 9 in the robotic therapy group and 10 in the control group. Clinical assessments in this pilot study used the FMA-UE, ARAT, and FIM to evaluate outcomes.

Results Summary: Both the experimental and pilot groups demonstrated significant improvements in motor function, strength, and daily autonomy, as indicated by the FMA-UE and mBI scores.

The RESTORE Pilot Study found that the robotic therapy group exhibited substantial improvements in FMA-UE, ARAT, and FIM scores compared to the control group.

A meta-analysis of robotic gait training also revealed notable enhancements in gait speed, balance, and endurance among stroke patients, with significant gains in Berg Balance Scale and Functional Ambulation Classification scores.

Results

The systematic review and trials on robotic-assisted rehabilitation for stroke patients consistently show significant improvements in motor function, strength, and independence, particularly in the recovery of the upper limbs. Both the experimental and pilot study groups exhibited positive outcomes, with notable advancements in key assessments such as the Fugl-Meyer Assessment for Upper Extremity (FMA-UE) and the Motricity Index (MI), which track motor function and muscle strength, respectively. These findings suggest that robotic rehabilitation interventions are effective in promoting short-term motor recovery, leading to enhanced physical capabilities and increased autonomy in daily activities. However, despite these positive outcomes, no significant improvements were observed in terms of pain management or long-term quality of life. This indicates that while robotic therapy can substantially improve motor function in the immediate phase following a stroke, it does not appear to address other critical factors such as pain relief or the long-term enhancement of overall well-being.

While the evidence supports the short-term effectiveness of robotic-assisted rehabilitation for improving motor recovery, further research is essential to evaluate its long-term benefits. Additionally, more studies are needed to optimize treatment protocols and determine the most effective ways to integrate robotic therapy with other rehabilitation strategies to achieve lasting improvements in both motor function and quality of life for stroke patients.

Discussion

The systematic evaluation and meta-analysis of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) on the effectiveness of robotic gait and upper limb rehabilitation for stroke patients reveals promising, though varied, outcomes. These trials primarily assessed key performance indicators such as gait speed, endurance, balance (using the Berg Balance Scale), functional ambulation (FAC), and mobility (TUG). Despite the rigorous assessment across studies and patient groups, the results were not consistently significant across all measures.

In the primary study from the Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation in Rome, both the experimental and pilot study groups showed notable improvements in motor function, strength, and autonomy, as measured by the Fugl-Meyer Assessment for Upper Extremity (FMA-UE), the Motricity Index (MI), and the modified Barthel Index (mBI). These improvements underscore the potential of robotic rehabilitation to enhance motor recovery in stroke patients. However, the assessment of pain, measured by the Numeric Rating Scale (NRS), showed no statistically significant changes, indicating that while robotic rehabilitation may improve motor function, it does not have an immediate impact on pain management in stroke patients.

The RESTORE Pilot Study also demonstrated positive trends, with both the robotic and control groups showing improvements in upper limb function (measured by FMA-UE and ARAT) and functional independence (measured by the FIM). Although the sample size was smaller (n=19), the results mirrored those from larger trials, indicating that robotic-assisted therapy, when combined with standard care, could lead to functional gains in stroke patients[3]. However, long-term effects and overall quality of life improvements, as noted in Wai-Tong Chien's 2020 review, were nonsignificant, with low to moderate evidence quality. This suggests that while robotic therapy provides short-term motor improvements, more robust evidence is necessary to confirm its long-term effectiveness.

Carmine Marini et al.'s 2010 review on younger stroke patients further highlights the challenge of generalizing outcomes across diverse patient groups. Stroke incidence and recovery vary significantly across populations, and this variability was evident in the wide range of stroke rates observed. While robotic therapy could offer unique benefits for younger stroke patients, differences in age, stroke severity, and patient demographics may influence rehabilitation outcomes.[1]

Mayte E. van Alebeek's 2017 study added further depth by examining stroke risk factors and patient demographics, reinforcing the complexity of stroke rehabilitation. As with the Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation's study, patient demographics and baseline characteristics can significantly impact recovery, suggesting that robotic therapy may need to be personalized based on age and clinical presentation[2].

A 2023 study by A. Pavan et al. provided a more targeted analysis of robotic upper limb neurorehabilitation, showing significant improvements in motor function (FMA-UE), strength (MI), and autonomy (mBI) in both the experimental and pilot study groups. These findings further support the potential of robotic rehabilitation, particularly in providing measurable functional gains in patients with subacute stroke. However, the absence of significant changes in pain levels (NRS) and the variability in outcomes across different trials emphasize the need for further research, especially in optimizing rehabilitation protocols and assessing the long-term effects of robotic therapy[7]

While robot-assisted therapy demonstrates clear benefits for stroke recovery, particularly in motor control and some aspects of quality of life, these effects are not always significantly superior to usual care. The limited number of trials and their variability warrant cautious interpretation of the results. The Kin-arm therapy tasks show particular promise in subacute stroke rehabilitation, but larger cohort studies are needed to confirm these findings.

The increasing incidence of stroke in young adults presents a significant public health challenge. Identifying demographic and lifestyle risk factors is crucial, as many are modifiable through lifestyle changes and medical interventions. Future research should standardize methodologies and provide clear definitions for "young adults" to improve the quality of epidemiological data. Organizations such as the World Stroke Organization and the American Heart Association should prioritize developing guidelines for prevention and treatment to reduce the burden of stroke.

Conclusion

Robotic-assisted rehabilitation shows significant promise for enhancing motor function, strength, and autonomy in stroke patients, as highlighted by positive outcomes in several key studies. Both subacute and chronic stroke populations have shown substantial improvements in motor function and independence through these interventions. However, improvements in pain management and quality of life remain limited, suggesting that while robotic therapy is effective for physical rehabilitation, it may not address broader psychosocial aspects as effectively. Furthermore, the evidence supporting the long-term benefits of robotic therapy is still insufficient, emphasizing the need for additional research with larger sample sizes, extended follow-up periods, and more diverse patient populations.

Personalized robotic therapy, as demonstrated in studies by the Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation and A. Pavan, offers a promising avenue for future interventions. By tailoring treatment to individual clinical outcomes, this approach enhances the relevance and effectiveness of therapy. To maximize the impact of robotic rehabilitation in stroke care, future trials should investigate the integration of robotic devices with other therapeutic modalities and explore their role in multidisciplinary rehabilitation programs. As robotic technology continues to evolve, combined with refined treatment protocols, it could lead to more significant and sustained improvements in stroke recovery.

Clinical relevance

1. **Increasing Incidence of Stroke in Young Adults**: Stroke, once considered primarily a concern for older adults, is increasingly affecting young adults. This demographic is facing long-term disabilities that impact their quality of life, independence, and ability to return to work or school. Understanding how high-tech robotic physiotherapy can assist in their recovery offers potential solutions for improving their functional outcomes and enhancing their quality of life.
2. **Challenges in Rehabilitation for Young Stroke Survivors**: Young stroke survivors face unique challenges in rehabilitation. Their rehabilitation needs differ from older patients due to factors like greater neuroplasticity, the desire to return to active lifestyles, and the potential for more aggressive rehabilitation. Robotic interventions can address these needs by offering tailored, precise, and intense therapy, which may accelerate motor recovery, enhance strength, and promote greater independence.
3. **Improved Motor Recovery and Independence**: Robotic physiotherapy is gaining traction as an effective tool for promoting motor recovery, especially in the upper limbs and gait. Young stroke patients can benefit from these interventions, which offer repeated, controlled movements that can enhance neuroplasticity, motor function, and strength. This can lead to improved outcomes in daily activities and greater functional independence, which is a key goal in stroke rehabilitation.
4. **Potential for Customization**: High-tech robotic devices can be personalized to match the specific needs and abilities of individual patients. This flexibility allows clinicians to adapt therapy protocols to optimize rehabilitation for young adults, ensuring that the intensity, duration, and complexity of tasks align with the patient's condition and recovery stage. Personalized treatment strategies are particularly beneficial in younger stroke patients who may need more customized approaches due to different rehabilitation goals.
5. **Enhancing Motivation and Engagement**: Robotic physiotherapy systems often incorporate interactive elements, which can increase patient engagement. For young adults, maintaining motivation during rehabilitation is crucial for recovery. The use of robots in therapy, with real-time feedback and interactive tasks, can improve patient adherence to rehabilitation programs, making therapy more engaging and enjoyable.
6. **Addressing Gaps in Long-Term Rehabilitation**: While robotic interventions have shown promise in short-term recovery, there is still a gap in understanding their long-term effects, especially in young stroke survivors. By evaluating the impact of robotic therapy on long-term outcomes like pain management, quality of life, and functional independence, this research can provide valuable insights into the sustainability and overall benefits of robotic physiotherapy interventions.
7. **Cost-Effective Rehabilitation Option**: Robotic physiotherapy, when integrated into clinical practice, could reduce the need for constant one-on-one human interaction, offering a potentially cost-effective solution for rehabilitation. In the context of rising healthcare costs and a growing stroke population, robotic systems can provide an efficient means of delivering high-quality care.
8. **Guiding Future Clinical Practices**: The findings of this review could inform clinical practices, shaping treatment protocols and guidelines for robotic-assisted rehabilitation in young stroke patients. If these interventions prove to be effective, they could be incorporated more widely into rehabilitation settings, allowing for standardized approaches to stroke recovery that make use of the latest technological advancements.

In conclusion, evaluating the impact of high-tech robotic physiotherapy interventions for young stroke survivors is clinically relevant as it addresses a growing need for effective, innovative rehabilitation strategies. These interventions hold the potential to improve motor function, strength, and independence, all of which are crucial for enhancing the quality of life and functional outcomes in young adults post-stroke. Furthermore, personalized and engaging robotic therapies can lead to better patient adherence and long-term recovery, making them an important avenue for clinical research and practice in stroke rehabilitation.

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