Inspiratory resistive loading improves cycling capacity: a placebo controlled trial

A D Gething, M Williams, B Davies


Background: Respiratory muscle training has been shown to improve both its strength and endurance. The effect of these improvements on whole-body exercise performance remains controversial.

Objective: To assess the effect of a 10 week inspiratory resistive loading (IRL) intervention on respiratory muscle performance and whole-body exercise endurance.

Methods: Fifteen apparently healthy subjects (10 men, 5 women) were randomly allocated to one of three groups. One group underwent IRL set at 80% of maximum inspiratory pressure with ever decreasing work/rest ratios until task failure, for three days a week for 10 weeks (IRL group). A second placebo group performed the same training procedure but with a minimal resistance (PLA group). IRL and placebo training were performed at rest. The remaining five control subjects performed no IRL during the 10 week study period (CON group). Cycling endurance capacity at 75% VO2peak was measured before and after the intervention.

Results: After the 10 week IRL intervention, respiratory muscle strength (maximum inspiratory pressure) and endurance (sum of sustained maximum inspiratory pressure) had significantly improved (by 34% and 38% respectively). An increase in diaphragm thickness was also observed. These improvements translated into a 36% increase in cycling time to exhaustion at 75% VO2peak. During cycling trials, heart rate, ventilation, and rating of perceived exertion were attenuated in the IRL group. No changes were observed for the PLA or CON group either in the time to exhaustion or cardiorespiratory response to the same intensity of exercise.

Conclusion: Ten weeks of IRL attenuated the heart rate, ventilatory, and perceptual response to constant workload exercise, and improved the cycling time to exhaustion. Familiarisation was not a factor and the placebo effect was minimal.

These studies have shown an improvement in performance after an RMT intervention, but, whereas Sonetti et al reported an improvement in the placebo group equal to that of the training group, in the study of Volianitis et al, the improvement in the trained group was significantly greater than the improvement in the placebo group. However, in the latter study, the improvements in the placebo group were expected to have resulted from whole-body training (subjects were in the preseason phase of training) and probably not a placebo effect. Finally, Romer et al showed no improvement in the placebo group. The extent of the placebo effect on exercise performance with this type of intervention is difficult to ascertain because all studies lacked a control group—that is, a group who receive no training.

The following study was designed to assess the effect of a 10 week IRL intervention on respiratory muscle performance and whole-body exercise endurance. Familiarisation (by using repeat trials) and the placebo effect (by using a placebo and a control group) were also considered. The study also provides data on a range of physiological and perceptual variables under identical conditions before and after the intervention. We hypothesised that IRL would significantly improve cycling endurance capacity over and above any improvements observed in the placebo and control groups.

Abbreviations: IRL, inspiratory resistive loading; MEP, maximum expiratory pressure; MIP, maximum inspiratory pressure; RMT, respiratory muscle training; RPE, rating of perceived exertion; TIRE, the test of incremental respiratory endurance; SMIP, sustained maximum inspiratory pressure; VIH, voluntary isocapnic hyperpnoea; VO2peak, peak oxygen consumption; Wmax, maximal power output
Inspiratory resistive loading and cycling capacity

Repeated this trial at the same resistance on the two successive occasions. Mass 75.8 (9.6) kg; peak oxygen consumption (V̇O2peak) (SD): age 22.7 (2.3) years; stature 175 (8.6) cm; body mass 75.8 (9.6) kg; peak oxygen consumption (V̇O2peak) 3.18 (0.69) litres/min; maximal power output (Wmax) 287 (64) W.

METHODS

Fifteen apparently healthy subjects (10 men, 5 women) who exercised regularly were recruited. Written informed consent was obtained from each subject, and the ethics committee of the University of Glamorgan approved all procedures. The physical characteristics of the subjects were (values are mean (SD)): age 22.7 (2.3) years; stature 175 (8.6) cm; body mass 75.8 (9.6) kg; peak oxygen consumption (V̇O2peak) 3.18 (0.69) litres/min; maximal power output (Wmax) 287 (64) W.

Procedure

Subjects presented to the laboratory after a 12 hour overnight fast, having consumed 500 ml water two hours before arrival to ensure that they were euhydrated, as confirmed during a pilot study. Subjects also provided a 48 hour dietary recall on the initial visit to the laboratory, and were given a copy of this diet to follow for the 48 hours before the next visit, and every time thereafter.

Each subject visited the laboratory four times before the intervention and three times after. The first visit comprised a spirometric assessment, maximum mouth pressures, and a submaximal cycling test to establish their oxygen consumption to determine the resistance required to elicit this oxygen consumption. Each test continued until volitional fatigue, defined as failure to maintain cadence >60 rpm. During the trial, measurements were made of oxygen consumption (V̇O2), ventilation, heart rate, respiratory exchange ratio, and RPE.

Subjects performed the trial three times at baseline, with data from the first trial excluded to allow for familiarisation. The best time of the second and third trials was taken as Tlim75 in an attempt to account for some of the day to day variation common to this type of trial. After the intervention, the subjects performed just two trials, as they should then have been familiarised with the test. Again Tlim75 was taken as the best of the two trials. More than 24 hours was allowed between completion of the last IRL session and re-evaluation of exercise capacity to provide adequate time for respiratory muscle fatigue to subside.

Inspiratory muscle training

Both IRL and placebo training were conducted three days a week for 10 weeks (30 sessions). All training, both IRL and placebo, was supervised by the same investigator (AG) to ensure 100% adherence. Subjects continued with their regular exercise training programmes and were required to keep a diary throughout the study in which both the frequency and duration of training were recorded.

The IRL device is flow resistive, with subjects having to breathe through a 2 mm leak, present to prevent glottal pressure. A maximum flow was set during the inspiratory
effort proportional to the pressure achieved. The measured resistance (pressure/flow) was about 270 cm H₂O/litre/s. Placebo subjects used the same breathing device with a different mouthpiece which had a greatly reduced flow resistance (a leak of 30 mm, resistance about 10 cm H₂O/litre/s).

IRL was undertaken using the test of incremental respiratory endurance (TIRE) system, which has previously been described. Briefly, during the TIRE, respiratory work is fixed in direct relation to individual capacity by establishing the subjects’ sustained maximum inspiratory pressure (SMIP). This is accomplished by encouraging the subject to inspire from residual volume to total lung capacity, through the full lung volume. Pressure is measured throughout the manoeuvre, with SMIP taken as the area under the curve (fig 1). Computer generated targets are presented to the subject, set at 80% of maximum, across the functional range of volume, and the frequency at which the templates are presented increases throughout the test. The initial rest period between inspirations is 60 seconds, and this is reduced every six manoeuvres to 45, 30, 15, 10, and finally 5 seconds. If at any point during the TIRE, the subject fails to achieve at least 90% of this reduced template, the test is over. At each training session, SMIPs are reassessed so that the work performed during the TIRE on that day is based on the new maximal effort.

Statistical analysis
Shapiro-Wilks tests were applied to each dependent variable to confirm distribution normality. Mixed between-within

### Table 1  Lung function at baseline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>IRL</th>
<th>PLA</th>
<th>CON</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁ (litres)</td>
<td>3.7 (0.7)</td>
<td>3.7 (1.0)</td>
<td>3.9 (0.80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(103 (12)</td>
<td>(93 (8))</td>
<td>(94 (10))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FVC (litres)</td>
<td>4.4 (0.6)</td>
<td>4.6 (1.1)</td>
<td>4.9 (0.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(106 (10))</td>
<td>(99 (48))</td>
<td>(98 (9))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEV₁/FVC ratio</td>
<td>0.84 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.80 (0.06)</td>
<td>0.81 (0.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(97 (8))</td>
<td>(95 (10))</td>
<td>(96 (10))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEF (litres/s)</td>
<td>10.5 (1.8)</td>
<td>8.7 (1.6)</td>
<td>8.2 (2.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(114 (12))</td>
<td>(98 (10))</td>
<td>(97 (8))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean (SD) (n = 5). Values in parentheses are the percentage of predicted value based on age, height, and sex. Values obtained after training are not shown.

IRL, Inspiratory resistive loading; PLA, placebo; CON, control; FEV₁, forced expiratory volume in one second; FVC, forced vital capacity; PEF, peak expiratory flow.

analyses of variance were used to test for between-group effects of the treatment (IRL, PLA, CON) and within-group effects of the intervention (before and after treatment). To determine where significant differences existed between pairs of mean values, Student’s paired sample t tests were used with a Bonferroni correction factor. Specifically, this analysis assessed the changes in mean values over time in each of the two types of performance tests, using peak power and VO₂peak for the incremental test, and time to exhaustion in the Tlim₇₅ trials. Changes in cardiorespiratory responses and RPE measured at fixed time points during Tlim₇₅ were examined in the same manner. To examine the effect of familiarisation on the first three trials, we used multiple Student’s paired samples t test with a Bonferroni correction. Significance for all two tailed tests was established at an α level of p<0.05, and data are expressed as mean (SD).

### RESULTS

#### Familiarisation
To account for familiarisation in our study, we used repeated trials. Figure 2 shows the cycling time to exhaustion at 75% VO₂peak for all subjects (regardless of group) before the intervention. The times for both the second and the third trial are both significantly greater than the time of the initial trial.
Importantly, there was no significant difference between the times of the second and third trials.

**Adherence to training**

For both groups that were expected to perform respiratory training—that is, both the PLA and IRL group—there was 100% adherence, with all 10 subjects completing 30 sessions during the 10 week period. In addition, supervision of the training, with appropriate encouragement ensured that subjects were fully motivated, producing a maximal training template, at the start of each training session.

**Whole-body training**

All subjects continued their regular exercise programmes during the 10 week intervention period and were required to keep a diary of all physical activity. During this period, training did not differ between/within the three groups in terms of the frequency and duration of training, although no record of the intensity of training was recorded. In week 1 of the training intervention, the frequency of whole-body training was 4.4 (1.1), 4.8 (1.1), and 3.8 (1.5) sessions/week for the IRL, PLA, and CON groups respectively. Duration of training was 198 (91), 200 (119), and 181 (68) min/week respectively. In the final week of training, the frequency (4.2 (0.8), 4.0 (1.0), 4.0 (1.2) sessions/week) and duration (197 (59), 198 (120), and 179 (78) min/week respectively) remained the same.

**Lung function**

Table 1 shows lung function, as assessed by FEV1, FVC, FEV1/FVC ratio, and PEF, measured at baseline. All values are within normal limits, and values after interventions were unremarkable.

**Respiratory muscle function**

After the intervention, MIP (an indicator of inspiratory muscle strength), SMIP, sum of SMIP (both indicators of inspiratory muscle endurance), and the duration of inspiration were all significantly increased compared with baseline in the IRL group (table 2). However, MEP was not improved after the intervention, demonstrating the specificity of the training to the inspiratory muscles. The control group, who performed one TIRE at baseline and again after the 10 week period, did not improve in any of the above variables.

**Incremental cycle test**

Maximum power output (Wmax) for the subjects did not differ between the IRL, PLA, and CON groups. Similarly, these values remained unchanged after the intervention for the three groups. VO2peak remained unchanged in all three groups.

**Cycling endurance (Tlim75)**

Before the training programmes, cycling time to exhaustion did not differ between the three groups (IRL, PLA, CON). After the training intervention, Tlim75 had significantly improved by 36% in the IRL group (p<0.05), a change that was not apparent in either the PLA or CON groups (fig 3). In the IRL group, all five subjects improved their individual cycling time to exhaustion by a mean value of 1292 (607) seconds, whereas in the placebo group a mean increase of 202 (526) seconds was not significant. Of the controls, an overall decrease of –96 (157) seconds was also not significant.

Heart rate, ventilation, VO2, and RER were measured throughout the time to exhaustion trial. We compared these variables (before and after the intervention) at 10, 20, and 30 minutes into exercise. After the IRL intervention, heart rate was significantly decreased at 10, 20, and 30 minutes (fig 4), and ventilation was significantly decreased at 20 and 30 minutes (fig 5).

VO2, respiratory frequency, and RER were not significantly altered after the intervention for all three groups (table 3).
The aim of this study was to assess the effect of a 10 week inspiratory resistive loading (IRL) programme on the cycling time to exhaustion. Familiarisation was not a factor, response to constant workload exercise, and improved the attenuated heart rate, ventilatory, and perceptual effects were observed for the IRL group during the trial, with RPE consistently lower for all subjects, but reaching significance only at the end of exercise (17.2 (1.1) and 15.4 (0.89); p<0.05) or when averaged across the whole trial (14.2 (1.3) before IRL and 12.9 (1.4) after IRL; p<0.05). There were no observed differences in the RPE for either the PLA or CON group (fig 6).

**Discussion**

**Main findings of study**
The aim of this study was to assess the effect of a 10 week flow resistive IRL programme on the cycling time to exhaustion at an intensity prescribed to elicit 75% of $V_{\text{O}_2}{\text{peak}}$. A placebo and control group facilitated the effect of familiarisation and placebo. The main finding was that IRL attenuated the heart rate, ventilatory, and perceptual response to constant workload exercise, and improved the cycling time to exhaustion. Familiarisation was not a factor, and the placebo effect was minimal.

**Placebo effects**
The placebo intervention was designed to fulfill the criteria for a true placebo, as outlined by Ojaunen and colleagues—that is, to be both inert and generate expectations, involvement, subjective utility, and be meaningful to the subjects. The placebo used in our study, which used a minimal exercise resistance, has been used in most studies of resistive training, but in our study, which used a minimal exercise resistance, has been recently criticised for failing to activate the important placebo factors mentioned above. However, we feel that the assessment of our placebo effect, with all subjects exposed to the same respiratory protocol and biofeedback, was comprehensive.

**Respiratory muscle function**
Inspiratory muscle strength, as measured by MIP, was improved in the IRL group but not in PLA or CON groups, whereas MEP was unchanged in all groups. The significant 34% increase in MIP shows the specificity of the training and is consistent with previous improvements reported after an IRL intervention, although Sonetti et al. reported only an 8% improvement albeit after a shorter intervention (five week) using simultaneous extremes of training—that is, both IRL and VIH training—which may result in less than optimal muscular adaptation.

Previously, RMT performed at different lung volumes has had the greatest effect within the lung volume in which the training was prescribed. The method of training used in this study required subjects to inspire at 80% of their maximum strength development rather than optimal muscular adaptation.

**Figure 6** Effects of 10 weeks of inspiratory resistive loading (A), placebo (B), or no respiratory training (C) on rating of perceived exertion during the Tlim 75. Values are mean (SD). *Significantly different from the value before the test (p<0.05).

**Table 3** Respiratory frequency, $V_{\text{O}_2}$, and respiratory exchange ratio during the cycling endurance trial

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Time [min]</th>
<th>IRL Before</th>
<th>IRL After</th>
<th>PLA Before</th>
<th>PLA After</th>
<th>CON Before</th>
<th>CON After</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$B_f$ (breaths/min)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>34.2 (4.0)</td>
<td>34.6 (2.2)</td>
<td>34.2 (4.2)</td>
<td>33.3 (4.9)</td>
<td>31.6 (5.4)</td>
<td>32.8 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>38.0 (4.4)</td>
<td>37.2 (3.1)</td>
<td>37.8 (5.2)</td>
<td>36.5 (2.1)</td>
<td>33.2 (6.1)</td>
<td>32.8 (4.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>44.2 (10.6)</td>
<td>39.4 (3.3)</td>
<td>44.0 (8.0)</td>
<td>45.3 (10.9)</td>
<td>40.6 (7.8)</td>
<td>35.6 (7.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$V_{\text{O}_2}$ (litres/min)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.6 (0.3)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.2)</td>
<td>1.9 (0.4)</td>
<td>1.9 (0.2)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.7)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2.6 (0.3)</td>
<td>2.7 (0.3)</td>
<td>1.9 (0.4)</td>
<td>2.0 (0.3)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>2.6 (0.5)</td>
<td>2.8 (0.2)</td>
<td>1.8 (0.5)</td>
<td>2.0 (0.4)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.8)</td>
<td>2.2 (0.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RER</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.04 (0.09)</td>
<td>0.99 (0.03)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.04)</td>
<td>1.03 (0.13)</td>
<td>1.09 (0.05)</td>
<td>1.06 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1.03 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.96 (0.03)</td>
<td>1.07 (0.05)</td>
<td>1.02 (0.17)</td>
<td>1.09 (0.03)</td>
<td>1.04 (0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.03 (0.10)</td>
<td>0.96 (0.05)</td>
<td>1.06 (0.07)</td>
<td>1.00 (0.12)</td>
<td>1.08 (0.03)</td>
<td>1.02 (0.09)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Values are mean (SD) (n = 5).
IRL, Inspiratory resistive loading; PLA, placebo; CON, control; $B_f$, respiratory frequency; $V_{\text{O}_2}$, oxygen consumption; RER, respiratory exchange ratio.
an increase in contraction velocity was the ultimate aim of the IRL intervention.

That respiratory muscle function can be improved after a specific RMT intervention is well established, but translation into an improvement in whole-body exercise performance is more controversial. This controversy remains, with the different methods of respiratory training (VIH or IRL) and outcome measures (maximal exercise, endurance exercise, or performance) being the obvious confounding variables. Sonetti et al. overcame this problem by combining the two types of training, but as pointed out by Romer et al., the concurrent strength and endurance training might have inhibited strength development and would explain the small 8% increase in MIP. Investigating and reviewing the results of resistive and hyperpnoea training separately may well provide insights into the mechanism behind RMT which is yet to be adequately explained.

**Maximal performance**

The improvements in respiratory muscle function observed in this study did not translate into an improvement in either VO₂peak or Wmax, which confirms previous findings on maximal exercise. The respiratory muscles do not limit VO₂peak, but rather are a part of it, just as much as any other muscles used during exercise. Lowering the cost of ventilation would increase the exercise intensity required to elicit VO₂peak, but VO₂peak would not be changed unless oxygen were more efficiently extracted by the locomotor muscles compared with those of the respiratory system. This has been shown to be the case using respiratory muscle unloading with a greater power output preserving VO₂peak, presumably because of the redistribution of blood flow. In our subjects, VO₂peak measures before and after IRL were unremarkable, and, although the difference is not significant, it is interesting that before IRL the maximum workload for the five subjects was 330W, and after it was 350W.

**Changes in Tlim₇₅**

The observed improvements in respiratory muscle function represent a 36% increase in the cycling time to exhaustion at an intensity prescribed to elicit 75% VO₂peak. This is in line with previous studies, in which an increase in cycling time to exhaustion has been shown using both VIH and IRL techniques. During the trial, a decrease in both heart rate and ventilation was also apparent. Previously, a decrease in minute ventilation after a VIH intervention has been reported, but subsequent studies by the same group failed to substantiate these findings. A decrease in heart rate after an isocapnic hyperpnoea training intervention has been noted by a single study.

It is unlikely that the improvements observed in this study were due to familiarisation, because of the rigorous nature of our testing protocol, which included averaging the results of two trials, both before and after intervention, and excluding the results of the initial trial (fig 2). Indeed, if familiarisation were a factor, despite our efforts, then we would have expected this to reveal itself by an improvement in Tlim₇₅ in the control group, which was not manifest. The inclusion of both a placebo and control group in the study design allowed us to assess the magnitude of the placebo effect in our subjects (assuming familiarisation to be minimal). The improvements observed in our placebo group were not significant, and therefore not a major factor in the interpretation of these data.

We attempted to control for other possible explanations for the progress in Tlim₇₅—for example, by providing our subjects with their previously recorded diets to follow in the 48 hour lead up to a trial. Although the subjects did not record exercise intensity—that is, heart rate—whole-body exercise training did not differ between or within the three groups, as determined by frequency and duration of training per week. Training intensity during the intervention is a potentially confounding variable, but, as all subjects understood the nature of the study, we do not consider it to be a major factor. For these reasons, we believe that the observed effects can be explained exclusively by the IRL intervention.

The experimental intervention in this study was therefore responsible for improvements in respiratory muscle function, which then, either directly or indirectly, resulted in an increase in the cycling time to exhaustion with a concomitant decrease in exercising heart rate, ventilation, and RPE during constant workload cycling.

**Mechanism of action**

Research into the mechanism behind respiratory training has focused on VIH. Several groups have systematically examined some of the possible mechanisms that could bring about the improvements in cycling endurance. To date, it has been shown that they are not due to a change in stroke volume or an increased oxygen supply as measured by blood gas concentrations. A decrease in blood lactate during endurance and after incremental exercise has been observed by some, but not all.

A decrease in the RPE, as found in this study, is a candidate for the observed improvements in cycling endurance. Volianitis et al. and Kellerman et al. reported a decrease in the perception of respiratory effort after a respiratory training intervention. In an outcome measure such as cycling time to exhaustion, which is by definition motivationally dependent, a decrease in the perception of exertion will probably have a profound effect on increasing Tlim₇₅.

Another possibility to explain the effects of RMT is altered ventilatory efficiency. The reduction in ventilation observed in this study and others may contribute to the improvements in fixed work rate tests. The decrease in ventilation for a given workload will reduce the metabolic requirements of the respiratory muscles and result in diminished competition for blood flow requirements between the respiratory muscles and locomotor muscles. Blood flow redistribution is cited by some studies that have examined IRL, although it has not been investigated directly. It follows a study in which reducing the work of breathing using a proportional assist ventilator during cycling exercise resulted in an increase in leg blood flow to the legs. An average 50% reduction in the work of breathing results in a 5–7% increase in leg blood flow, and this translates into a 15% increase in endurance performance. However, it is very unlikely that the adaptations from a 10 week respiratory training protocol will decrease the work of breathing to anywhere near the 50% decrease achieved using a ventilator. Therefore, although changes in leg blood flow may occur, they are likely to be very small and difficult to detect (C A Harms, personal communication). If a small reduction in the oxygen cost of breathing did occur after IRL (and this would explain the decrease in heart rate), it may be that our study lacked the statistical power to detect it.

A significant effect of an IRL intervention on exercising heart rate has not been previously reported, but has been shown after a VIH intervention, with an increase in stroke volume suggested as the potential mechanism. However, Markov et al. has since reported no change in stroke volume after a VIH intervention. How the attenuation in heart rate observed in our study was brought about is not clear and requires further investigation, but the mechanism may be different from that involved in VIH.

Romer et al. suggested that the mechanism behind the improvements in exercise performance was multifactorial,
with each of the above exerting some effect. We would agree with this statement, but would emphasise that the exact contribution of each remains unknown.

CONCLUSION

IRL using the TIRE device produced an increase in both the strength and endurance of the inspiratory muscles. These improvements resulted in an increase in cycling endurance at 75% VO\textsubscript{2}peak that was not apparent in either the placebo or control group. Familiarisation was kept to a minimum by the use of repeat trials, and the placebo effect was not a significant factor. This is the first study to adequately address the effect of IRL using both a placebo and control group. How these improvements influence actual competitive performance remains to be seen. The mechanisms behind the observed improvements have not yet received the required investigation, but continued studies in this area should provide the answer.

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