**Endurance**

Many articles that examine exoskeletons look at resulting changes in endurance. Of those articles that were not review articles, 80% utilized the 6 Minute Walk Test (6MWT) to measure endurance. Other measurements used were the 2 Minute Walk Test (2MWT), six minute arm cycle, and the 30 Minute Walk Test (30MWT). The majority evaluated subjects with spinal cord injury (37 articles) followed by stroke (17 articles). There were 32 case series or studies, followed by 19 review articles, and 10 randomized controlled articles. Of studies that utilized a single device, Ekso1.1/GT/NR device, referred to as “Ekso” in this paper, was used the most (25 articles), followed by ReWalk (9).

*Studies completed in IP Rehab*

Research completed in a lab setting is often challenging to recreate in a clinic environment, and therefore research completed in a clinical setting is typically more meaningful to clinicians. One such study was conducted at 3 inpatient rehabilitation hospitals in Canada where patients with subacute stroke (CVA) who were unable to walk without substantial assistance were randomized to receive exoskeleton or standard physical therapy until discharge, replacing 75% of sessions. When assessed as-treated, the group that received exoskeleton training was able to walk further at discharge, though this was not statistically significant, and at 6 month follow-up, which was statistically significant.1 At 6 month follow up, the Ekso group completed an average of 211.2 m over 6 minutes, while the usual care group was able to complete less than half of that distance at 103.0 m.1 In an acute rehabilitation facility, 22 patients were provided with at least 3 sessions of Ekso training during their length of stay, and these patients were compared with historical matched controls. Distance was measured during each physical therapy session and it was found that during standard of care sessions, there was no difference between groups, but during Ekso sessions, the Ekso group walked significantly further (83.2m) than the control group (48.99m) who only received standard of care therapy.2 A similar result was found in 14 participants who walked a further distance in Ekso sessions versus standard of care sessions. Improvement in 6MWT distance and speed was seen, and the magnitude of improvement was moderately correlated with the number of robotic training sessions.3

*Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)*

Multiple randomized controlled trials exist that utilize subjects with SCI and examine the effects of an exoskeleton on gait endurance. In one, nine individuals were randomly assigned to receive exoskeleton or conventional gait training daily for 3 weeks. Significant improvement in the 6MWT was seen only in the exoskeleton group who improved from 50 m to 67 m post intervention, while the control group improved insignificantly from 147 m to 154 m.4 Another study compared Ekso to body weight support treadmill training (BWSTT) to passive controls, and found that while each group improved their 6MWT distance over the 12 week intervention, the amount of improvement differed, with the Ekso group improving by 34%, the BWSTT group improving by 28%, and the passive control group improving by 18%.5

A study of 16 individuals with incomplete tetraplegia who were randomized to complete an extensive Ekso or activities based program offered thrice per week for 24 weeks showed no difference in walking endurance between groups, though both groups improved.6

Some studies completed clinical outcomes within the exoskeleton, specifically those that studied participants with complete injuries or who were unable to walk without a device. One study of 10 patients who completed a 10-session ABLE exoskeleton walking program over five weeks showed similar results in the exoskeleton versus KAFOs.7 In a crossover study, 70% of participants were able to walk >80 m in ReWalk or Ekso during a 6MWT by 12 sessions, and 82% of participants met this metric by the end of the intervention, with the average distance covered at 36 sessions being 125.3±40.4 m.8 Those who used ReWalk tended to walk further in 6MWT, however they also had less deficits at baseline than those who used Ekso.8

There are many case studies that examine how endurance changes after using an exoskeleton. A statistically significant improvement in 6MWT distance was seen after 12 sessions of walking in Able for 24 subjects with SCI who were able to ambulate at baseline and post-training.9 Small improvements of up to 10 m during the 6MWT were seen after 20 sessions of walking in ReWalk.10 Six subjects with thoracic or lumbar AIS C injuries improved after 20 sessions of Ekso by an average of 51.5 m during 6MWT, with five of those subjects improving by 50% or more.11

A large number of studies measured the distance one could cover in 6 minutes in the exoskeleton. Distance ranges were from 36m to 255m with intervention length between 3 and 120 sessions in different devices including ReWalk, Uan.Go, Ekso, and Indego.12–22 Some of these studies tracked improvements in 6MWT distance over the period of subjects learning how to utilize an exoskeleton. Improvements varied depending on exoskeleton and duration of intervention. Thirteen sessions of Uan.Go resulted in an improvement of 40 m.13 Twenty sessions of Ekso resulted in an improvement of 12.8 m by participants who were unable to walk prior to exoskeleton treatment, 36.07 m in eight participants of which seven were motor complete, and 47 m in a sample of three subjects with lower thoracic to upper lumbar injuries, two of which were complete.21,23,24 The same number of sessions in ReWalk resulted in an improvement of 23.2 m.10 Midway to endpoint assessments, spanning 12 sessions, demonstrated improvements of 69.5 m in a study using Ekso and 15.5 m in a study using Indego18,25, while another study showed that participants could walk in the Able exoskeleton 1.9 times further at session 12 versus session 1.9 Distance walked, when stratified by injury level, was lower for those with higher injuries.15,20 Outdoor 6MWT distances were also longer than indoor 6MWT distances, if measured within the same sample.21,24 One study measured the 2 minute walk test and found that longest walks completed within a 24 session protocol were between 13.8 and 24.9 m, which took place between session 10 and 21.26 When compared to KAFOs, subjects covered 73% more distance and required 3.2 times less exertion in 6 minutes in the Indego.27

A number of reviews comment on how endurance changes after using an exoskeleton in a population with SCI. One that examined 28 articles determined that the mean distance during a 6MWT was 108.9 m.28 Another review concluded that to see significant change in walking performance in persons with incomplete SCI, at least 20 sessions must be prescribed.29 Some review articles report that overground exoskeleton use results in a significant increase in distance traveled over 6 minutes29,30, while some do not agree that there is a significant change.31 Two meta-analyses determined that significant change in endurance resulting from using an exoskeleton was only present in patients with a duration of injury less than six months.31,32 When compared to KAFOs, one review reports that the few articles that look at this do not agree that one intervention is better than the other, though a greater percentage of these articles demonstrate superiority of an overground exoskeleton in the 6MWT.33 Review articles also commented on the range of frequency and length of study protocols.29,34

*Stroke (CVA)*

Walking endurance is frequently measured in studies using participants with CVA. One randomized trial of 75 participants with subacute stroke compared five sessions per week of Ekso or conventional gait training in addition to conventional rehabilitation sessions provided over three weeks. Endurance measured through 6MWT improved for both groups, from 48.6±42.39 m to 139.24±104.7 m in the Ekso group and 44.29±59.15 m to 149.43±130.15 m in the conventional group.35 These improvements were both significant, but not significantly different from each other.35 This was confirmed by a similar number of people in each group who achieved the MCID.35 Another randomized trial separated 32 subjects with chronic CVA to receive either ExoAtlet or Lokomat training provided three times a week for eight weeks after doing a standard physical therapy program. Both groups improved 6MWT, but difference between groups was similar, showing no superiority of one intervention.36

Forty-six participants who underwent 15±2 sessions of Ekso gait training showed that in the subgroup of the 32 subjects who were able to walk at both baseline and conclusion of the study, the distance covered during 6MWT improved from 69.53±58.46 m to 130.41±88.81 m.37 Another study showed improvement in 6MWT distance in 12 subjects with subacute CVA after undergoing 12 sessions of Ekso gait training over 4 weeks.38 Distance improved from 79.5±46.8 m to 92.0±59.3 m in subjects with chronic CVA and from 157.6±77.6 m to 205.1±113.2 m in subjects with subacute CVA which were both significant improvements.38 On the contrary, a 12.6±1.95 session Ekso gait training program did not result in significant changes in the 6MWT between pre- and post-intervention in five subjects with stroke.39

Multiple review articles exist that comment on endurance in participants with CVA. Some revealed that using an exoskeleton had a significant positive effect on walking endurance40–42, while others showed no significant difference between groups.43–47

*Multiple Sclerosis (MS)*

There are two known randomized controlled trials using exoskeletons in subjects with MS. In one, the effects of 4 weeks of Ekso walking were compared with those of conventional gait training when each was delivered twice weekly. The robotic group demonstrated improvement in 6MWT distance as compared to minimal changes of the control group, but it is likely that this effect was due to differences in baseline performance where the control group was more impaired.48 The other compared the same interventions offered at the same frequency in 4 participants with relapsing-remitting MS and found that endurance improved 13% in the control group while the Ekso group showed minimal change.49 Again this could be attributed to difference in baseline measures, this time with the Ekso group being more impaired.49

A case study of a 71 year old male who trained with Uan.Go ten times showed improvements in 6MWT distance from 53 m at baseline to 61 m after intervention.50 In another study of 10 participants who used Ekso five times per week for three weeks showed no difference in 6MWT distance between pre- and post-intervention.51

A unique study had 10 subjects perform a 6MWT in an exoskeleton and outside of the device. Six subjects walked faster in Ekso, while the other four walked faster on their own.52

Two reviews examined gait training with a robotic device on subjects with MS. One reviewed 17 papers and the other 16 studies. Both showed that robotics helped improve walking endurance in participants with MS.53,54

*Conclusion*

Endurance is measured in the research both while wearing the exoskeleton and as a result of training with an exoskeleton.

Most studies agree that while wearing an exoskeleton, any user can complete a walk of at least 6 minutes, and that when this assessment is completed multiple times over the course of learning to use the device, users will improve in the amount of distance they cover. Distance walked during this time varies largely, but all are below what is considered normal for a healthy, older adult.

For persons who are able to walk independently before and after exoskeleton intervention, the majority of studies agree that endurance improves. Some report that endurance after exoskeleton training improves moreso than conventional therapy or a control group, while others report similar levels of improvement. No articles report that endurance worsens from using an exoskeleton.

Barriers to this research include the variety in number of total sessions provided as an intervention as well as the time over which the intervention takes place. The variety of exoskeleton devices used could also affect the outcomes. Finally, we don’t know how these devices are being used in the research. These technologies are complicated with significant differences and many options in their software, and articles do not typically provide insight into what programs the subjects walked in and how much they were challenged during this. This choice of software could also affect the improvements made in endurance.

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ABI = acquired brain injury, CVA = stroke, MS = multiple sclerosis, SCI = spinal cord injury