**Function**

There are a number of articles that assess functional changes in participants. The majority of the articles looked at a population with stroke (27 articles) or spinal cord injury (22 articles). These publications are fairly evenly split between case series (17 articles), randomized controlled trials (12 articles), and review articles (13 articles). Fourteen articles assessed function using the Walking Index for Spinal Cord Injury (WISCI-II), 17 utilized the functional ambulation category (FAC), 18 used the Functional Independence Measure (FIM), and 8 used the Rivermead Mobility Index. Review articles examined articles utilizing many devices. Most other studies utilized the Ekso1.1/GT/NR device, referred to as “Ekso” in this paper.

*Studies Completed in Inpatient Rehabilitation*

While some studies were completed in a true research environment, numerous articles summarize trials or analysis that were completed with patients in inpatient rehabilitation. This is important because many research trials utilize dosages that are unrealistic in an insurance-based healthcare system.

A randomized controlled trial was conducted at 3 inpatient rehabilitation hospitals with participants with subacute stroke who were unable to walk without assistance. Nineteen of the 36 patients were randomized to replace 3 physical therapy sessions per week with Ekso gait training. Analysis was completed both per-protocol and as-treated, as there were 5 participants assigned to receive Ekso training that did not receive the protocol as planned.1 When assessed as-treated, those that were treated with an exoskeleton regained independent walking in 24.1±9.7 days versus those in the control group who achieved independent walking at 35.3±15.7 days.1 A similar study design had 29% of the Ekso group and only 8% of the control group achieving independent ambulation at the conclusion of the study period.2 Another prospective randomized controlled trial utilized subjects with spinal cord injury admitted to an inpatient rehabilitation unit. Groups received either conventional therapy or Ekso walking plus conventional therapy and received the same amount of treatment time. Spinal Cord Independence Measure (SCIM) total score and International Standards for Neurological Classification of Spinal Cord Injury (ISNCSCI) total motor and sensory scores significantly increased for the group receiving Ekso as part of their rehab.3 These improvements were 13 points higher than the conventional therapy group on the SCIM, 14 points higher on the total motor score, and 22 points higher on the total sensory score by discharge.3

The bulk of studies completed during inpatient rehabilitation were retrospective, comparing medical records of patients who received some exoskeleton treatment as part of their stay with those that did not. There were varied findings, though most were in favor of exoskeleton usage. One study looked at 22 patients post-stroke who received at least 3 Ekso sessions during their length of stay and a comparison group matched with controls based on age, gender, length of stay, hemiparetic side, and admission motor FIM. Notable conclusions were regarding dosage – typical therapy sessions for both groups included walking of similar distances, however the group that received Ekso treatment walked almost double the distance total during their inpatient stay (1742.7±163.3 m versus 906.96±123.42 m).4 Average change in motor FIM was significantly greater in the group receiving robotic training (28.3±1.5 versus 23.6±1.74).4 In the group receiving robotic training, there was a correlation between total distance and difference in motor FIM.4 A similar study examining patients with SCI and CVA compared those who received usual care with those who received at least one exoskeleton session. 58% of those with SCI who received exoskeleton sessions and 56% of those with CVA who received exoskeleton sessions had 5 or more sessions, and their functional outcomes were compared with those who received usual care.5 Statistically significant results included FIM change in patients with SCI favoring those who received Ekso treatment.5 However, another analysis of participants with non-traumatic brain injuries compared those who received some treatment using the Ekso exoskeleton with age matched controls who received the same amount of therapy time demonstrated that while the whole sample significantly improved their FIM total, FIM subscores, level of assistance, and distance walked, when changes from admission to discharge between the two groups were compared, the only statistically significant difference between the groups were level of assistance and distance walked, both in favor of the control group.6

While there were no comparison groups, other retrospective patient analysis in those utilizing exoskeleton treatment was found favorable. In an analysis of 36 patients post stroke and ABI who utilized the Ekso during their rehabilitation stay, the number of robotic steps was found to be a predictor for discharge motor FIM score, with every additional 1000 robotic steps equating to an increase of 3 points on discharge motor FIM.7 An additional study examined 25 patients who utilized the Ekso as part of their inpatient stay on either the SCI or CVA unit for an average of 4.5 sessions (range: 3-8) during their 38.5 day rehabilitation stay (range: 25.5-58.5).8 These folks significantly improved all functional outcomes including WISCI-II, SCIM, FIM, and Stroke Rehabilitation Assessment of Movement (STREAM) from admission to discharge.8 A retrospective review of 18 patients with SCI who utilized Ekso during their inpatient stay and continued use into outpatient therapy found that those with complete injuries improved their WISCI-II scores from 0±0 at inpatient admission to 3±4.6 by outpatient discharge, whereas the motor incomplete group demonstrated a change of 0.2±0.4 to 9.0±6.4.9

Two studies identified a longer length of stay for those who were treated with exoskeletons. One study identified important between-group differences for those with CVA who tended to be younger and more impaired at admission versus the usual care group.5 This could explain why those who received exoskeleton treatment had a longer length of stay.5 Another study that showed an increased length of stay for those using exoskeletons compared 8 patients with SCI to 16 controls and demonstrated that the change in FIM score was significantly higher in the exoskeleton group at 37.8±10.8 versus 26.5±14.3 in controls.10 It is important to note that both of these studies were completed before lump sum payments for inpatient rehabilitation facilities in the United States were instated.

*Stroke (CVA)*

In patients with stroke, research studies overall were in favor of exoskeleton usage. Different devices were utilized, as were patients with varying chronicity. Pre-post studies demonstrated functional improvements in these participants. Forty-six subjects with subacute stroke participated in 15±2 sessions with Ekso with testing pre and post intervention. Of the 14 patients who were unable to walk pre-intervention, 8 regained the ability to walk post-intervention.11 FAC and walking handicap scale also improved in this sample indicating post-intervention that participants no longer required manual assistance.11 Another similar study showed improvements in functional ambulation classification post 15-sessions of Ekso training for eight subacute patients, averaging a 1.88±0.64 change score12 whereas 23 participants completing 12 Ekso sessions increased scores by 2.5 and 1 for subacute and chronic participants, respectively.13 Similar results were found utilizing the Indego exoskeleton for four sessions in subacute patients.14 A smaller sample of two patients within 30 days of stroke onset received Ekso training three times per week for ten weeks both improved their functional ambulation classification by 2.15

There are a few randomized controlled trials that favored exoskeleton usage. In a study using exoAtlet, 17 participants with subacute stroke were randomized to receive treatment with exoAtlet or conventional training for 12 sessions and only those in the exoAtlet group significantly improved their FAC while the control group remained with scores averaging 0.16 Another study of 30 participants with chronic ischemic stroke demonstrated that the 15 subjects assigned to receive 24 sessions of gait training using Ekso improved their FIM scores by 22 points whereas those who received therapist-aided gait training only improved by 4 points.17 Another study randomized 40 participants to gait training five times per week for 8 weeks using either Ekso or traditional overground gait training. Only those in the Ekso group met the MCID for the Rivermead index, indicating greater change from pre to post intervention.18 Using the Rivermead and Barthel indices, 23 patients who underwent rehabilitation using the Ekso were compared to 21 patients who received conventional rehabilitation. While these groups were not equal at baseline, the exoskeleton group improved in more categories and was stronger than those receiving conventional treatment.19

While most studies demonstrated superiority of exoskeleton usage, one study found no statistically significant difference between groups in regards to their improvement in FAC.20

One study examined a high-intensity technology-assisted program for three to five sessions per week over four weeks with 14 participants post-CVA. This consisted of many types of devices for both upper and lower extremities. Each subject received an average of 46±15 sessions of technology-assisted training over the study period and FAC scores improved from 2 to 3.5.21

In reviews comparing patients post-stroke to a control group, participants who received training with an exoskeleton significantly improved their FAC with small effect size.22 A large review of 34 randomized controlled trials consisting of 1166 patients confirmed this finding, with superiority of the exoskeleton group in improving FAC with a p value of 0.03 overall and 0.04 for subjects with subacute CVA, indicating significance.23 Overground exoskeletons were more likely to promote functional independence.23 A large review of 36 trials including 1472 participants demonstrated that using electro-mechanical assisted gait training in combination with conventional physical therapy increased the odds of participants gaining independence with walking (Odds ratio 1.94).24 Review articles highlight the variability in studies completed on exoskeletons in regard to device, dosage, patient population, and study design.25

*Spinal Cord Injury (SCI)*

Research studies using subjects with spinal cord injuries had neutral to positive changes in function. A randomized controlled trial assigned the Ekso group (n=8) to three sessions per week for 24 weeks of Ekso gait training and the control group (n=8) to the same schedule of training consisting of resistance, cardiovascular, flexibility, overground gait training, and treadmill gait training. All participants had chronic SCI. Six (two in Ekso group) were non-ambulatory at both baseline and conclusion of training, however, two participants in the Ekso group were able to take some steps at the conclusion of training.26 A prospective analysis of 52 participants with SCI who completed 24 Ekso sessions utilized the SCIM-III to identify statistically significant improvement in the total score and all subscores in those who were recently injured (<1 year) and in total score of those with chronic injuries.27 In those who were recently injured (<1 year), 20% had gait function at baseline, and this improved to 54% at the conclusion of treatment.28 One patient in the chronically injured group moved from having no gait function to having gait function.28 After 36 sessions of Ekso training, 55% of Ekso participants transitioned from being household to community ambulators, while none of the control participants did.29 A case study of one patient who had a T11 chronic injury utilized the ReWalk over 6 months and went from being unable to walk to walking independently.30 A feasibility study using the Able exoskeleton had 24 participants with mostly subacute SCI walking in the device for 12 sessions over 4 weeks. At the conclusion of training, the average WISCI score improved from 4.417 to 6.045 out of a possible 20, with 11 of the 22 subjects who had baseline and post-intervention testing showing improvements.31 SCIM mobility scores were taken at baseline and at a 4 week follow up for all 24 subjects, and the average SCIM mobility score (out of 40) improved from 16.708 to 19.208.31 Total SCIM scores showed a similar trend of improvement from a median of 68 to 72.5 out of 100.31

In comparison, one study did not show any functional changes after using exoskeletons. A pre-post study looking at 7 participants with SCI showed no difference in SCIM scores after exoskeleton walking with the Ekso, however these participants averaged a score of 68.00±7.53 out of a possible 100, so the lack of improvement may have been due to the higher independence level at baseline.32

Four review articles looked at a large variety of overground and treadmill based robotic devices in the SCI population. One meta-analysis largely looking at Lokomat studies showed superiority using robotics for Lower Extremity Motor Score (LEMS) improvement and FIM.33 Acute patients with SCI showed greater improvement in LEMS and WISCI-II than those who received conventional treatment.34 WISCI-II also improved more in exoskeleton treated patients versus those receiving conventional treatment for those with SCI of any level.35

A unique review article looking at 19 studies using subjects with SCI aimed to determine the dosage required to see improvements. 60-min sessions offered 3 times a week for 8 weeks was the determined duration required for functional restoration, though it is important to note that most of these studies were completed in a research environment that is able to provide care for much longer than typical under an insurance-based healthcare system.36

*Multiple Sclerosis (MS)*

Four articles specifically examine function in patients with MS. These articles utilized small sample sizes and grossly did not show between group differences when comparing functional improvements from conventional treatment versus treatment with an exoskeleton.37 Other studies were not comparative but showed improvement in functional scales after exoskeleton usage.38 In one study, a group was treated with the Ekso device and the control group received conventional physical therapy. While not reaching levels of statistical significance, a trend toward improvement was observed in favor of the Ekso group for the time per group interaction in the total short physical performance battery score.39

*Acquired Brain Injury*

One unique article examines the use of the Ekso device on patients with severe brain injuries who had a score of 3 or less on the motor portion of the Coma Recovery Scale (localization to noxious stimulation). Ten patients completed an average of 10.4±4.8 overground exoskeleton sessions as part of their inpatient rehabilitation stay. After an average rehabilitation stay of 47.3 days, they improved their Disability Rating Scale score from 21.9 to 18.1 where a lower score indicates less disability.40

*Review Articles*

A review article looking at both SCI and CVA populations examined 15 lower extremity review articles and 8 upper extremity review articles highlighted the heterogeneity in the literature which makes drawing sweeping conclusions next to impossible. This heterogeneity is in both device type and function as well as in the duration of a single session and global period of treatment.41

*Conclusion*

There is a significant amount of literature that focuses on functional changes resulting from using an exoskeleton. Overall, using an exoskeleton helps to improve function in patients with a variety of neurological diagnoses, though this is not unanimous. A number of functional measures are utilized in the literature which may also measure somewhat different things. Some articles report a specific subscore of an outcome measure, while another article may use the total score. All of this, in addition to the variety of devices and dosage of the intervention reported in the literature, makes drawing a sweeping conclusion difficult.

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