Impact of Physical Activity on Dementia Prevention and Cognitive Decline in Older Adults

BRUNA MARQUES VALIM FARIA

Abstract- ***Physical activity is increasingly recognized as a key strategy for preserving cognitive function and reducing the risk of dementia in older adults. Evidence from longitudinal studies, randomized controlled trials, and meta-analyses indicates that multicomponent exercise programs—combining aerobic training with coordination, balance, and cognitive-motor tasks—enhance neuroplasticity, cerebral perfusion, and memory performance, thereby mitigating age-related cognitive decline and lowering the risk of Alzheimer's disease. Aerobic exercise improves cardiovascular health and increases hippocampal volume, while coordination and balance exercises stimulate sensorimotor networks, executive function, and attention. Community-based and structured preventive programs, including group classes and individualized home routines, have demonstrated improvements in episodic memory, processing speed, and functional independence. This article synthesizes current scientific evidence and practical recommendations, emphasizing the integration of combined exercise modalities into daily life as an accessible, low-cost intervention to promote healthy brain aging and cognitive resilience in older adults.***

Index Terms- ***Physical activity, Cognitive function, Dementia prevention, Older adults, Alzheimer's disease, Memory, Neuroplasticity, Multicomponent exercise, Brain health, Healthy aging.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Regular physical activity is a robust and evidence-based intervention to prevent cognitive decline and dementia in older adults. Age-related neurodegeneration, vascular changes, and metabolic dysregulation contribute to progressive memory loss, executive dysfunction, and increased risk for Alzheimer's disease and other dementias. Multicomponent exercise programs, combining aerobic activity with coordination, balance, and cognitive-motor tasks, have been shown to enhance neuroplasticity, increase cerebral perfusion, and improve cognitive performance (Northey et al., 2018; Erickson et al., 2011). Aerobic exercise alone stimulates hippocampal growth, supports angiogenesis, and improves cardiovascular function, which collectively reduce risk factors associated with cognitive impairment. Complementing aerobic training with coordination and balance exercises engages sensorimotor networks, enhances attention, processing speed, and executive function, and fosters neural reserve that may delay the onset of clinical dementia symptoms (Law et al., 2014; Suzuki et al., 2013).

Community-based programs and structured preventive interventions demonstrate that older adults can achieve measurable cognitive improvements through consistent engagement. Group aerobic classes with integrated balance and coordination drills, dancing, Tai Chi, or interactive movement routines have produced improvements in memory recall, spatial awareness, and dual-task performance (Marmeleira et al., 2009; Sofi et al., 2011). Home-based interventions with simplified equipment such as resistance bands, step boards, or guided walking combined with cognitive tasks also yield benefits, particularly for those with mobility restrictions or limited access to fitness centers. Cognitive engagement through exercise—such as pattern stepping, obstacle navigation, or dual-task walking—amplifies the benefits of aerobic training by requiring simultaneous physical and mental processing, strengthening networks responsible for executive control and memory consolidation.

Preventive exercise programs show dose-response relationships: regular moderate-to-vigorous activity totaling at least 150 minutes per week, coupled with

two or more sessions per week of coordination and balance exercises, produces the most consistent cognitive benefits (Blondell et al., 2014; Northey et al., 2018). Aerobic training, particularly treadmill or brisk walking, increases hippocampal volume and improves spatial memory, while coordinative exercises such as dance or ball games enhance visuospatial processing and multitasking ability. Importantly, combined modalities also improve mood, reduce anxiety and depression, and enhance sleep quality—factors closely linked to cognitive health in aging populations.

Adaptation for older adults with limited mobility is essential. Chair-based aerobic routines, seated coordination drills, and supported balance exercises can provide safe yet effective cognitive and cardiovascular stimulation. Aquatic exercise allows for low-impact aerobic engagement while performing cognitive-motor tasks, such as following patterns of movement in the water or counting steps, which maintain attention and executive function. Progressive intensification, careful monitoring of symptoms, and individualized goal setting enhance adherence and ensure sustainable benefits. Social engagement in exercise—through group classes or peer-supported home sessions—further reinforces motivation, providing cognitive stimulation, enjoyment, and a sense of purpose, all of which are associated with slower cognitive decline.

Neurobiological evidence supports these behavioral outcomes. Aerobic exercise increases levels of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), which promotes neuronal survival, growth, and synaptic plasticity, and enhances hippocampal volume—a region critical for learning and memory (Erickson et al., 2011). Coordination and complex motor activities activate prefrontal, parietal, and cerebellar circuits involved in planning, attention, and visuospatial processing, creating compensatory neural pathways that help maintain cognitive function even as age-related degeneration occurs. The synergistic effects of aerobic and coordination exercises thus target both structural and functional aspects of the brain, maximizing resilience against neurodegenerative processes.

Implementation of preventive exercise routines should be gradual, enjoyable, and adaptable. Programs may include short bouts of 10–15 minutes of walking interspersed with dual-task coordination exercises, resistance-band routines for upper and lower limbs, or simple balance sequences such as tandem or single-leg stance, performed two to three times per week. The combination of structured sessions and incidental movement—walking, stair climbing, and daily activity—supports sustained engagement. Monitoring cognitive outcomes, such as episodic memory tests or timed dual-task performance, can provide feedback and motivation, while adherence is further strengthened through social support, gamification, or group-based challenges.

Overall, regular physical activity, especially multicomponent exercise programs that combine aerobic and coordination elements, represents a powerful, accessible, and low-cost strategy to protect cognitive function in older adults. These interventions not only reduce the risk of dementia and slow age-related cognitive decline but also enhance overall well-being, mood, mobility, and independence. Evidence strongly suggests that even modest but consistent engagement in physical and coordinative activity can produce meaningful neurocognitive benefits, making exercise a cornerstone of preventive strategies for healthy brain aging.

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