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Cryotherapy and Whole Body Cooling: A Critical Review of Physiological Impacts on Elite Athletes

Wojciech Tokarczyk
Medical University of Silesia,
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice, Poland
wt.tokarczyk@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8905-6833

Karol Demel
Medical University of Silesia,
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice, Poland
karoldemel2908@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5485-7987

Monika Dziedzic
Complex of Municipal Hospitals in Chorzów
Strzelców Bytomskich 11, 41-500 Chorzów, Poland
lek.monikadziedzic@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4482-0898

Adriana Potoczek
University Clinical Hospital in Katowice,
Medyków 14, 40-752 Katowice, Poland
adriana.potoczek@interia.pl
https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3981-3490

Justyna Talaska
Medical University of Silesia,
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice, Poland
justyna.talaska@onet.pl
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-4723-9777

Antoni Kantor
Medical University of Silesia,
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice, Poland
kantor.antoni@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-7908-6440

Krzysztof Pietrzak
University Hospital of Zielona Góra
Zyty 26, 68-046, Zielona Góra
k.p.pietrzak98@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-9249-3161

Adrian Dyląg
District Railway Hospital in Katowice
Panewnicka 65, 40-760 Katowice
adrian.dylag.xyz@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1599-0383

Jakub Król
Medical University of Silesia,
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice, Poland
jakrol2000@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0006-0696-1904

Kacper Raputa
Medical University of Silesia,
Poniatowskiego 15, 40-055 Katowice, Poland
kacperraputa@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/my-orcid?orcid=0009-0004-6709-5427

ABSTRACT

Background: Cryotherapy and whole-body cooling are widely adopted in sports medicine to enhance recovery and performance in elite athletes. Modern techniques like whole-body cryotherapy (WBC) reduce inflammation and muscle soreness, yet their physiological mechanisms and long-term safety remain debated.

Purpose: This review assesses physiological impacts of cryotherapy on key systems (cardiovascular, neuromuscular, immune) and evaluates benefits, risks, and protocol standardization needs.

Methods: PubMed literature (2012-2023) was systematically analyzed using keywords "cryotherapy," "whole-body cooling," and "elite athletes." Relevant studies on recovery, performance, and safety were synthesized, acknowledging design variability and language bias.

Results: Cryotherapy reduces muscle damage markers (e.g., creatine kinase) and inflammation, aiding acute recovery and strength retention. WBC outperforms passive recovery but shows inconsistent efficacy versus cold-water immersion. Risks include hypothermia and blunted hypertrophy. Small samples and non-standardized protocols limit generalizability.

Conclusions: Cryotherapy benefits elite athletes contextually, particularly for acute recovery. Implementation requires strict safety protocols (exposure limits, monitoring) and individualized approaches. Future studies should prioritize standardized parameters, long-term safety, and mechanistic insights into mitochondrial/neural adaptations to optimize athlete outcomes.

Keywords: cryotherapy, whole-body cooling, elite athletes, physiological impact, recovery strategies, sports performance, inflammation reduction, neuromuscular recovery, muscle damage, cold exposure

Introduction

Cryotherapy and whole-body cooling have emerged as prominent recovery and performance-enhancing modalities in sports medicine. Historically, cryotherapy traces its roots to ancient civilizations, where cold exposure was used for therapeutic purposes. However, modern applications, particularly whole-body cryotherapy (WBC), have evolved significantly since the 1970s, gaining traction in the treatment of inflammatory conditions and later in sports recovery [1]. In recent years, these methods have become increasingly popular among elite athletes, driven by their purported benefits in reducing muscle soreness, accelerating recovery, and enhancing performance [2]. The growing adoption of cryotherapy in professional sports underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of its physiological impacts.

Elite athletes are constantly seeking innovative strategies to optimize performance and recovery while minimizing injury risks. Cryotherapy and whole-body cooling are often marketed as effective tools for achieving these goals. However, the physiological mechanisms underlying these methods remain incompletely understood, and their long-term effects on athlete health are still debated [3]. A critical examination of the physiological impacts of these interventions is essential to inform evidence-based practices, ensuring that athletes derive maximum benefits without compromising their health. Furthermore, understanding the interplay between cryotherapy and various physiological systems—such as the cardiovascular, neuromuscular, and immune systems—can provide valuable insights into their efficacy and safety [4].

Despite the growing body of research on cryotherapy and whole-body cooling, the literature is marked by inconsistencies and controversies. For instance, while some studies report significant reductions in inflammation and muscle damage, others find minimal or no effects [5]. Additionally, there is a lack of consensus on optimal protocols, including temperature, duration, and frequency of exposure. Moreover, the long-term physiological impacts, particularly on immune function and cardiovascular health, remain underexplored [6]. These gaps highlight the need for a critical synthesis of existing evidence to clarify the benefits and risks associated with these methods.

Objectives and Research Questions

This review aims to critically evaluate the physiological impacts of cryotherapy and whole-body cooling on elite athletes, addressing the following key questions:

1. What are the underlying physiological mechanisms of cryotherapy and whole-body cooling?
2. How do these interventions affect various physiological systems, including the cardiovascular, neuromuscular, and immune systems?
3. What are the potential benefits and risks of these methods for elite athletes, particularly in terms of performance, recovery, and overall health?

By addressing these questions, this review seeks to provide an understanding of the current state of knowledge, identify areas requiring further research, and offer practical recommendations for athletes and practitioners.

Methodology

This review critically examines the physiological impacts of cryotherapy and whole-body cooling on elite athletes. Data were collected from PubMed, focusing on articles published after 2012, using keywords such as "cryotherapy," "whole body cooling," "physiological impact," "elite athletes," "recovery," and "performance." Relevant studies, including clinical trials, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses, were analyzed to evaluate the effects on performance, recovery, and overall athlete health. Limitations include potential language bias and variability in study designs, but the review provides a comprehensive synthesis of current evidence.

Physiological Basis of Cryotherapy and Whole Body Cooling

Cryotherapy and WBC exert physiological effects through direct and systemic responses to cold exposure. The primary mechanism involves the activation of cutaneous thermoreceptors, particularly transient receptor potential melastatin 8 (TRPM8) channels, which detect temperatures below 27°C, initiating afferent signals to the central nervous system (CNS) to modulate thermoregulation. This triggers immediate vasoconstriction, reducing peripheral blood flow by up to 30% to conserve core temperature, followed by reactive vasodilation post-exposure to enhance oxygenated blood return [7]. Concurrently, cold exposure slows nerve conduction velocity (NCV) by 2-5 m/s per 1°C drop in tissue temperature, dampening pain signaling and reducing muscle spindle activity, which may contribute to analgesic effects. Systemically, WBC stimulates the cardiovascular system, eliciting a transient increase in heart rate (10-20%) and blood pressure (5-15 mmHg) due to sympathetic activation, while lowering cutaneous and intramuscular temperatures (4-8°C). Metabolically, cold stress elevates basal metabolic rate by 250-400 kcal/day to maintain thermogenesis, predominantly through shivering and non-shivering pathways involving brown adipose tissue[8]. Hormonally, acute cold exposure triggers a 2- to 3-fold surge in norepinephrine and adrenaline within 15 minutes, alongside elevated cortisol levels, which collectively enhance glycogenolysis and lipolysis. Biochemically, WBC reduces pro-inflammatory cytokines (e.g., IL-6, TNF-α) by 20-40% and increases anti-inflammatory markers (e.g., IL-10), while augmenting antioxidant enzyme activity (e.g., superoxide dismutase) to mitigate exercise-induced oxidative stress [9][10]. These responses highlight the complex interplay between cold-induced neurovascular adaptations and systemic metabolic-hormonal adjustments in athletes.

Impact on Performance and Recovery in Elite Athletes

Enhancement of Recovery

Post-exercise recovery strategies, such as cryotherapy and compression therapy, are critical for reducing muscle damage and inflammation in elite athletes. WBC demonstrates superior efficacy in lowering biomarkers of muscle damage (e.g., creatine kinase) and pro-inflammatory cytokines compared to passive recovery, likely due to its anti-inflammatory and vasoconstrictive effects [11]. While cold water immersion (CWI) and sports massage provide moderate relief from muscle soreness, cryotherapy offers faster restoration of neuromuscular function, particularly in high-intensity training contexts [12]. Contrast water therapy (CWT) may transiently improve vascular function but lacks consistent long-term benefits [13]. Compression garments further aid recovery by reducing edema, though their impact on pain relief remains secondary to cryotherapy [14]. These modalities should be selected based on specific recovery goals, such as acute inflammation control or vascular optimization.

Effects on Performance

Recovery-focused interventions, including cryotherapy and compression, directly enhance athletic performance by preserving strength, endurance, and cognitive-motor precision. Cryotherapy helps maintain baseline strength during intensive training cycles by minimizing muscle microtrauma, while compression garments attenuate fatigue-related declines in repeated sprint performance [15,16]. For endurance athletes, cryotherapy improves subsequent performance metrics, such as time-trial efficiency, through enhanced parasympathetic reactivation [17]. Cognitive benefits, such as improved reaction time and coordination, are also linked to reduced central nervous system fatigue following cryotherapy [3]. However, excessive use of cryotherapy may impair long-term muscular adaptations, necessitating a balanced approach to modality selection [15].

Safety Considerations and Potential Risks

While cryotherapy and whole-body cooling (WBC) offer therapeutic benefits, their application necessitates stringent safety protocols to mitigate adverse effects. Hypothermia remains a critical risk, particularly during prolonged exposure (>3 minutes) to extreme cold (-110°C to -160°C), with core temperature drops of 0.3–0.5°C reported even in controlled settings. Circulatory complications, such as transient hypertension (15–25 mmHg elevation) and peripheral vasoconstriction, may exacerbate cardiovascular strain in athletes with pre-existing conditions (e.g., arrhythmias or Raynaud’s phenomenon). Frostbite and cold-induced tissue injuries, though rare, have been documented in cases of improper protective gear use or direct skin contact with cryogenic surfaces [18]. Contraindications include acute respiratory or cardiovascular diseases, neuropathy, and cold urticaria, which heighten susceptibility to systemic complications. Current guidelines recommend limiting WBC sessions to 2–4 minutes, maintaining ambient temperatures above -110°C, and ensuring continuous monitoring of vital signs to prevent thermal overload [19]. Individualization is paramount: athletes with low body fat (<8%) or reduced cold tolerance require shorter exposures (1–2 minutes) and gradual acclimatization. Post-session rewarming strategies, such as passive insulation or light aerobic activity, are essential to restore normothermia and minimize rebound inflammation [20]. Finally, sport-specific adaptations are advised; for instance, power athletes may benefit from localized cooling over WBC to avoid impairing explosive muscle function. Adherence to these evidence-based protocols ensures safer implementation while optimizing recovery outcomes.

Critical Analysis of the Literature

Assessment of Study Quality

The methodological rigor of studies investigating cryotherapy and whole-body cooling in elite athletes remains inconsistent. While systematic reviews, such as the Cochrane analysis by Costello et al. [3], highlight the potential of whole-body cryotherapy (WBC) for reducing muscle soreness, they also emphasize the prevalence of small sample sizes ($n < 20$) and insufficient blinding in randomized trials, limiting the generalizability of findings. For instance, Bouzigon et al. [1] note that many studies fail to standardize cooling parameters (e.g., temperature, duration), leading to heterogeneous outcomes. Similarly, comparative studies like Abaïdia et al. [5], which evaluated cold-water immersion (CWI) against WBC, utilized rigorous crossover designs but lacked long-term follow-up, weakening conclusions about sustained benefits. Additionally, Roberts et al. [15] demonstrated robust methodologies in tracking neuromuscular recovery post-cryotherapy, yet their focus on homogeneous cohorts (e.g., male endurance athletes) limits applicability to diverse populations.

Inconsistencies and Divergences

Conflicting evidence persists regarding cryotherapy's efficacy. For example, while Abaïdia et al. [5] reported no significant difference between WBC and CWI in reducing creatine kinase levels, Higgins et al. [13] found WBC superior for recovery in team-sport athletes, likely due to variations in exercise intensity and cooling protocols. Similarly, Bouzigon et al. [1] observed improvements in parasympathetic reactivation after WBC, whereas other studies, such as Roberts et al. [15], noted blunted hypertrophic signaling, suggesting context-dependent outcomes. These discrepancies may stem from differences in cooling duration, athlete training status, or outcome measurement timing.

Identification of Research Gaps

Critical gaps include the need for standardized cooling protocols and long-term safety data. Costello et al. [3] emphasize the lack of consensus on optimal WBC parameters (e.g., temperature, session frequency), while Bouzigon et al. [1] call for investigations into gender-specific responses, as most studies focus on male athletes. Furthermore, mechanistic research into cryotherapy's impact on mitochondrial function and neural drive is scarce, hindering a unified physiological explanation for observed benefits [15].

Practical and Theoretical Implications

The integration of cryotherapy and whole-body cooling into athletic recovery protocols presents both practical and theoretical implications for sports medicine. For coaches and athletes, current research underscores the potential of WBC and CWI to mitigate exercise-induced muscle damage and accelerate recovery, though optimal protocols remain debated. While WBC offers a time-efficient alternative to CWI, studies such as Wilson et al. [20] suggest comparable efficacy between the two modalities in reducing post-marathon muscle soreness, emphasizing the need for individualized recovery strategies. Furthermore, Higgins et al. [13] highlight that shorter, more frequent cooling sessions may enhance recovery without disrupting adaptive training responses. Recent meta-analytical findings advocate for personalized approaches, considering factors such as exercise type and athlete susceptibility to cold-induced vasoconstriction [21]. Future research should prioritize standardized protocols to resolve inconsistencies in exposure duration, temperature, and frequency. Investigations into the longitudinal effects of chronic cold exposure on athletic performance and immune function are also warranted, as current data remain inconclusive [22]. Additionally, integrating wearable technology to monitor physiological responses in real-time could refine cold therapy applications, ensuring precise, athlete-specific interventions [22]. Methodological improvements, including larger sample sizes and placebo-controlled designs, are critical to isolate the true physiological impacts of cooling modalities beyond placebo effects.

Conclusions

Cryotherapy and whole-body cooling have emerged as valuable tools for enhancing recovery and performance in elite athletes, supported by their ability to reduce inflammation, mitigate muscle damage, and accelerate neuromuscular restoration. The physiological mechanisms—ranging from vasoconstriction-driven anti-inflammatory effects to transient hormonal surges—underscore their potential to optimize post-exercise recuperation, particularly in high-intensity and endurance contexts. However, the efficacy of these modalities is highly context-dependent, with outcomes varying across athlete populations, cooling protocols, and sport-specific demands. While whole-body cryotherapy (WBC) often outperforms passive recovery and traditional methods like cold-water immersion (CWI) in acute settings, inconsistencies in study designs and cooling parameters (e.g., temperature, duration) complicate definitive conclusions. Furthermore, cognitive benefits such as improved reaction time appear transient, and excessive reliance on cryotherapy risks impairing long-term muscular adaptations, necessitating a balanced approach tailored to individual needs.

Practically, integrating cryotherapy into recovery programs requires adherence to safety protocols—limiting exposure to 2–4 minutes at temperatures above -110°C, prioritizing cardiovascular monitoring, and individualizing sessions based on athlete physiology. Combining cryotherapy with compression garments or sport-specific cooling strategies (e.g., localized applications for power athletes) may enhance outcomes while minimizing risks like hypothermia or frostbite. Future research must prioritize standardized protocols to resolve current discrepancies, alongside longitudinal studies assessing long-term impacts on immune function, cardiovascular health, and gender-specific responses. Mechanistic investigations into cryotherapy's effects on mitochondrial efficiency and neural drive, coupled with advanced monitoring technologies, could further refine its application, ensuring evidence-based practices that maximize athlete performance without compromising health. Addressing these gaps will solidify cryotherapy's role in sports medicine, bridging the divide between empirical promise and practical reliability.

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Author Contribution

Conceptualization: Wojciech Tokarczyk

Methodology: Wojciech Tokarczyk, Antoni Kantor

Software: Antoni Kantor, Jakub Król

Check: Justyna Talaska, Monika Dziedzic

Formal analysis: Adriana Potoczek, Adrian Dyląg

Investigation: Karol Demel

Resources: Kacper Raputa, Krzysztof Pietrzak, Jakub Król

Data curation: Antoni Kantor, Kacper Raputa

Writing - rough preparation: Karol Demel

Writing - review and editing: Monika Dziedzic, Antoni Kantor

Visualisation: Justyna Talaska, Jakub Król

Supervision: Krzysztof Pietrzak, Wojciech Tokarczyk

Project administration: Karol Demel, Adriana Potoczek

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