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## Cold Water Immersion After Training: Regeneration vs Adaptation — A Systematic Review

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## **Abstract**

## **Background**

Cold water immersion (CWI) is widely used to aid post-exercise recovery in athletes. It can reduce soreness and accelerate readiness, but routine use may blunt hypertrophic adaptations after resistance training. The effects on acute recovery, neuromuscular function and long-term adaptations remain debated.

## **Aim**

This study reviews physiological and functional outcomes of post-exercise CWI, focusing on recovery and adaptation across training modalities.

## **Materials and methods**

A systematic search in PubMed and Google Scholar identified studies on post-exercise CWI in healthy participants (2008–2023). Included studies were mechanistic, acute, longitudinal interventions and meta-analyses. Outcomes assessed were soreness, perceived recovery,

neuromuscular performance, anabolic signaling and long-term adaptations in resistance and endurance training. Data extracted included participants, exercise type, CWI protocol (temperature, duration, site, timing), comparators and outcomes. Findings emphasized randomized trials and meta-analyses.

## **Results**

Meta-analyses show that CWI reduces delayed-onset muscle soreness (DOMS) at 24–96 h and improves perceived recovery. Markers of muscle damage or inflammation are inconsistent. CWI aids short-term performance, especially with limited recovery or heat stress. In hypertrophy-focused resistance training, regular use may reduce muscle growth and type II fiber adaptations. In endurance training, effects are largely neutral. Responses vary according to sex, training status and context; protocol differences and expectancy effects add variability.

## **Conclusions**

CWI should be used strategically: most useful for rapid recovery (e.g., tournaments, multiple sessions, heat stress), but avoided after hypertrophy-focused resistance training. In endurance phases, CWI is adaptation-neutral and may support day-to-day recovery.

## **Keywords**

cold water immersion, recovery, hypertrophy, endurance, mTOR, PGC-1 $\alpha$ , DOMS, athletic performance, resistance training, endurance training, periodization, thermoregulation, muscle adaptation.

## **1. Introduction**

## **2. Research materials and methods**

### **2.1. Participants**

The review included studies with healthy human participants. Eligible studies comprised randomized or controlled trials, crossover designs and systematic reviews or meta-analyses investigating post-exercise cold water immersion (CWI) at temperatures  $\leq 15^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Only studies reporting acute outcomes ( $\leq 96$  h) and/or long-term training adaptations were considered. Relevant literature was identified through a systematic search of electronic databases, primarily PubMed and Google Scholar.

### **2.2. Procedures and Measures**

CWI protocols differed across studies with respect to immersion temperature, duration, body region (e.g., full-body, lower limbs) and timing relative to exercise. Exercise protocols and testing procedures were extracted to allow comparisons across studies. Comparator conditions, such as passive recovery or alternative recovery strategies, were also documented. Outcome measures included physiological, performance and perceptual responses following exercise and CWI interventions.

### **2.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

From each study, data were extracted on participant characteristics, exercise and CWI protocols, comparator conditions and reported outcomes. Due to heterogeneity in study designs and endpoints, a structured narrative synthesis was conducted, with emphasis on findings consistently reported across multiple studies – particularly meta-analyses and high-quality randomized controlled trials.

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### 3. Research results

#### 3.1. Mechanistic Background

##### **Mechanisms supporting acute regeneration**

Cooling induces peripheral **vasoconstriction**, reduces tissue temperature and attenuates nerve conduction velocity. In addition, the hydrostatic pressure associated with immersion promotes fluid shifts that may limit edema formation and nociceptive signaling, thereby contributing to reductions in perceived soreness and improvements in subjective recovery within 24–96 hours post-exercise.<sup>1,2</sup> CWI has also been shown to transiently restore autonomic balance (vagal-related HRV), particularly after supramaximal exercise.<sup>3</sup>

##### **Mechanisms underlying blunted hypertrophy**

Post-exercise CWI during resistance training consistently decreases muscle temperature and perfusion. This response likely reduces amino-acid delivery and diminishes activation of the mTOR/p70S6K pathway, as well as satellite cell activity. Such mechanisms correspond with attenuated increases in myofiber cross-sectional area (CSA) and lean body mass.<sup>4,5</sup>

##### **Endurance signaling differs**

Following endurance exercise, post-exercise cooling has been shown to acutely increase PGC-1 $\alpha$  expression and angiogenic transcripts. Elevated PGC-1 $\alpha$  has also been observed in contralateral, non-cooled limbs, suggesting systemic effects.<sup>6–8</sup> Despite these signaling responses, longitudinal training studies frequently report no additional improvements in performance with regular CWI.<sup>9,10</sup>

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#### 3.2. Effects on Acute Recovery (Regeneration)

##### **Subjective outcomes (soreness, perceived recovery)**

Systematic reviews and meta-analyses consistently report reduced **delayed-onset muscle soreness (DOMS)** with CWI compared to passive control at 24–96 h post-exercise. The pooled

effects are small to moderate, and align with improved perceived recovery.<sup>11–14</sup> Earlier meta-analyses also demonstrated benefits of CWI for soreness following strenuous exercise.<sup>15</sup> Evidence indicates that protocols using water around **11–15 °C for 10–15 min** provide effective analgesia. Considerable heterogeneity across studies remains.<sup>12</sup>

### **Neuromuscular performance and sport-specific tasks**

Under **heat stress** or during short recovery intervals, cold water immersion improves repeated sprint and cycling performance. It also supports thermoregulatory recovery between exercise bouts.<sup>16,17,18</sup> In intermittent and contact-sport simulations, benefits include improved short-sprint performance and wellness ratings measured at 24 h post-exercise.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, in **temperate** conditions, a 4-km cycling time-trial showed **no performance improvement** following brief post-exercise CWI.<sup>20</sup> Placebo-controlled studies indicate that participant expectancy significantly influences perceived benefits and, in some cases, functional outcomes of CWI.<sup>21,22</sup>

### **Inflammation and cellular stress markers**

Biopsy-based and blood-marker studies indicate that CWI is **no more effective than active recovery** at modulating acute inflammatory or stress responses after heavy resistance exercise.<sup>23</sup> Variations in CWI temperature and duration do **not** consistently affect systemic inflammatory mediators following sprint-jump protocols.<sup>24,25</sup>

### **Interim summary**

For **acute regeneration**, CWI reliably reduces DOMS and improves perceived recovery. Effects on neuromuscular performance depend on context, with greater benefits observed in heat or during congested schedules. Objective markers of muscle damage and inflammation show inconsistent responses. Participant expectancy contributes to observed effects.<sup>11–14,16–25</sup>

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### 3.3. Effects on Training Adaptation

#### Resistance training: hypertrophy and strength

In 12-week resistance training randomized controlled trials (RCTs), **post-exercise CWI reduced** p70S6K phosphorylation and satellite cell responses. It also attenuated increases in muscle mass and type II fiber cross-sectional area (CSA), while **maximal strength** gains were partly preserved.<sup>4,5</sup> A meta-analysis combining resistance and endurance programs reported a **harmful pooled effect** of regular CWI on strength outcomes, including one-repetition maximum, isometric strength and strength endurance.<sup>26</sup>

#### Endurance training: mitochondrial signaling and performance

Post-endurance CWI can acutely increase **PGC-1 $\alpha$**  and VEGF mRNA,<sup>6,7</sup> including systemic effects in contralateral limbs.<sup>8</sup> However, multiple training studies report **no significant improvement** in endurance performance or mitochondrial protein content when CWI is applied regularly across sprint interval or HIIT programs.<sup>9,10,26</sup> In practical terms, during endurance training phases, CWI appears adaptation-neutral and may be strategically applied to support day-to-day readiness.

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### 3.4. Dose, Timing, and Moderators

#### Dose (temperature and duration)

Meta-analytic evidence supports **cool (approximately 11–15 °C) water immersions for approximately 10–15 min** to reduce muscle soreness, while acknowledging heterogeneity and protocol nuances.<sup>12–14</sup>

#### Timing

Immediate post-exercise application has been the most extensively studied. Short 5–10 min immersions can reduce thermal strain in **hot** environments, yet may not improve time-trial performance the following day under **temperate** conditions.<sup>16,17,20</sup>

### Context moderators

- **Environment:** Benefits are more apparent in **heat**, due to thermoregulatory unloading.<sup>16–18</sup>
  - **Exercise modality:** Functional benefits occur more frequently in intermittent, high-intensity and contact sport models than in heavy resistance training.<sup>11–14,19,23</sup>
  - **Expectancy/placebo:** Participant belief can enhance perceived recovery and, occasionally, functional outcomes, although effective blinding remains challenging.<sup>21,22</sup>
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### 3.5. Safety and Contraindications

CWI is generally safe under supervision in healthy athletes. However, **abrupt immersion** can evoke autonomic conflict, characterized by simultaneous sympathetic cold shock and parasympathetic diving reflex. This response occasionally provokes **arrhythmias**, particularly during facial immersion combined with breath holding.<sup>27</sup> Pre-existing cardiovascular disease warrants caution.<sup>28,30</sup> Rarely, **swimming- or immersion-induced pulmonary edema (SIPE)** occurs during strenuous cold water activity. Identified risk factors include cold water, high exertion, older age, female sex, overhydration and tight wetsuits.<sup>29–33</sup>

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### 3.6. Practical Recommendations: Regeneration vs Adaptation

**Cold water immersion (CWI, approximately 11–15 °C for 10–15 min, immediately post-exercise) is recommended under the following conditions:**

- Recovery periods are **shorter than 24–48 h**, such as during tournaments or congested schedules, and reduction of **soreness** and maintenance of readiness are priorities.<sup>11–14</sup>
- Exercise sessions or competitions conducted in **hot environments**, when **thermoregulatory relief** is desired.<sup>16–18</sup>
- Short-term restoration of **power** is the primary goal, with recognition of potential expectancy effects.<sup>21,22</sup>

**Routine post-exercise CWI should be avoided or minimized under the following conditions:**

- During **hypertrophy-focused** training phases, when the primary goal is muscle growth and increases in fiber cross-sectional area.<sup>4,5,26</sup>



- Following sessions that provide a key **anabolic** stimulus, such as heavy resistance exercise with emphasis on type II fiber development.<sup>4,5</sup>

#### **Conditional or neutral use:**

- During **endurance** training blocks, CWI appears to be **performance-neutral** over several weeks. It may be applied strategically to support day-to-day readiness, without expectation of enhanced long-term adaptations.<sup>6–10,26</sup>

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### **3.7. Limitations and Future Directions**

Heterogeneity in CWI protocols (including temperature, duration and immersion depth), exercise models and outcome assessment timing complicates pooled interpretation. High-quality blinding is challenging, and **placebo** or **nocebo** effects remain influential.<sup>21,22</sup>

Future research should focus on refining **individualization** based on sex and training status. Periodization context – such as heat versus temperate conditions and microcycle congestion – should be considered. Comparative studies of **cooling** and **heating** strategies across training phases are also warranted.<sup>33–36</sup>

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## **4. Discussion**

Post-exercise cold water immersion (CWI) reliably reduces delayed-onset muscle soreness (DOMS) and enhances perceived recovery, particularly when recovery periods are short or exercise occurs in hot conditions. These effects are primarily mediated by peripheral vasoconstriction, hydrostatic pressure and transient autonomic modulation, although objective markers of muscle damage and inflammation show inconsistent responses.

In resistance training, routine CWI can attenuate anabolic signaling, limiting type II fiber hypertrophy and lean mass gains, while maximal strength gains are less affected. Therefore, CWI should be minimized during hypertrophy-focused phases to preserve long-term adaptations.

In endurance training, acute increases in mitochondrial signaling do not consistently translate into improvements in endurance performance, suggesting that CWI is largely neutral for adaptation but may aid day-to-day readiness.

Responses are moderated by individual and contextual factors, including sex, training status, exercise modality, timing and expectancy effects. Protocol heterogeneity remains a limitation, highlighting the importance of individualized and context-specific recovery strategies.

In practice, CWI should be applied strategically: for rapid recovery during congested schedules or heat stress, but avoided when maximizing hypertrophy is the priority, ensuring that recovery strategies align with training objectives.

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## **5. Conclusions**

Cold water immersion effectively supports acute regeneration, particularly by reducing delayed-onset muscle soreness and enhancing perceived recovery. It can aid short-term performance restoration when recovery periods are limited or exercise occurs under heat stress. Routine post-exercise application during resistance training hypertrophy phases is not recommended because it may attenuate muscle growth and adaptations in type II fibers.

In endurance training, long-term performance outcomes are largely neutral, allowing tactical use to support day-to-day readiness. Recovery strategies should be aligned with training objectives, prioritizing rapid recovery when necessary and maximizing adaptive stimuli when possible. Consideration of individual factors – including sex, training status and periodization-context – may optimize outcomes, while expectancy effects and protocol heterogeneity should be acknowledged in both research and practice.

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## **Disclosure**

### **Author's contribution**

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Receiving founding – no specific founding.

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### **Declaration of the use of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process.**

In preparing this work, the authors used ChatGPT for the purpose of checking language accuracy. After using this tool/service, the authors have reviewed and edited the content as needed and accept full responsibility for the substantive content of the publication.

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