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Red Light Revolution: Harnessing Photobiomodulation for Peak Athletic Performance and Systemic Healing

Joanna Słuchocka

asiaslu@onet.pl

https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8143-2451

University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

Tymon Lewalski
lewalski.tymon@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5345-2077
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

Martyna Florczyk
martyna.gorlewskag4@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6385-110X
RCKiK in Olsztyn

Lidia Płuciennik
Lidi_PL@wp.pl
https://orcid.org/0009-0007-5860-9213
Medical University of Lodz

Oskar Lewalski
Oskar.lewalski@o2.pl
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-0914-0219
University of Warmia and Mazury in Olsztyn

Klaudia Jeruć
klaudia.gorlewska.g4@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8107-7736
Provincial Specialist Children's Hospital in Olsztyn named after Prof. Dr. Stanisław Popowski

Corresponding author: Joanna Słuchocka, asiaslu@onet.pl

ABSTRACT

Background. Photobiomodulation (PBM), or red light therapy (RLT), involves the application of non-ionizing light to biological tissues to obtain physiological changes. While historically used for wound healing, its role in systemic medicine and athletic performance has recently expanded.

Aim. This review aims to evaluate the multi-systemic clinical indications of PBM, ranging from sports performance and recovery to neurology, endocrinology, chronic pain management and others.

Methods. A comprehensive literature review was conducted using PubMed and Google Scholar, focusing on peer-reviewed clinical trials and systematic reviews (2003–2024) regarding red and near-infrared light applications.

Results. Evidence suggests that PBM stimulates cytochrome c oxidase, increasing ATP production and modulating oxidative stress. Clinical outcomes include reduced muscle fatigue, accelerated bone and tendon repair, neuroprotective effects in brain injury, and significant reduction in chronic inflammatory markers.

Conclusions. PBM is a versatile, non-pharmacological intervention that can be utilized to prepare athletes for peak performance, accelerate recovery from soft-tissue and neurological injuries and treat a broad spectrum of clinical pathologies. Success in clinical and athletic settings is highly dependent on adhering to specific wavelength and energy density (dosimetry) protocols.

Keywords: photobiomodulation (PBM), red light therapy (RLT), dosimetry, sports medicine, athletic performance, muscle recovery

1. Introduction

Photobiomodulation (PBM) utilizes visible red (600–700 nm) and near-infrared (NIR) (700–1100 nm) light to induce physiological changes. Unlike thermal lasers used in surgery, PBM utilizes low-level power to trigger photochemical reactions within the cell [1, 2]. While its ergogenic benefits in sports are well-documented, discovering its ability to cross the blood-brain barrier and modulate systemic cytokines has unlocked new possibilities in neurology, internal medicine and other specialties [3, 4].

2. Mechanism of Action

The therapeutic effects of RLT are primarily driven by mitochondrial phototransduction. The key photoacceptor is cytochrome c oxidase (CCO), which is the terminal enzyme in the mitochondrial electron transport chain [5].

When CCO absorbs red and NIR photons, inhibitory nitric oxide (NO) is displaced, thereby increasing oxygen binding and accelerating the electron transport chain [1, 5]. This process unleashes several critical physiological cascades:

- **ATP Synthesis:** Enhanced mitochondrial membrane potential increases cellular energy, facilitating rapid repair [6].
- **Retrograde Signaling:** Transient reactive oxygen species (ROS) bursts activate transcription factors that upregulate antioxidant defenses and anti-inflammatory cytokines [7].
- **Systemic Effects:** Evidence suggests a "bystander effect" where localized treatment can result in systemic anti-inflammatory benefits via circulating signaling molecules [8].

3. Broad Clinical Indications

3.1. Sports and Exercise

- **Recovery and Delayed Onset Muscle Soreness (DOMS):** Post-exercise PBM significantly accelerates recovery. Studies demonstrate that athletes receiving PBM after exhaustive exercise exhibit lower levels of creatine kinase (CK) and blood lactate, alongside reduced subjective pain scores associated with DOMS [8, 9].
- **Ergogenic Effects (Performance Enhancement):** Applying PBM before training—known as photobiomodulation pre-conditioning—delays neuromuscular fatigue.

Research highlights increased time to exhaustion, higher peak torque in resistance training, and improved sprint performance, largely due to pre-emptive ATP loading and enhanced microcirculation [10, 11].

- **Soft Tissue Injuries and Tendinopathies:** PBM modulates the acute inflammatory phase and stimulates fibroblast proliferation, accelerating collagen synthesis. It is highly effective for Achilles and patellar tendinopathy, ligament sprains, and muscle strains [12, 13].
- **Bone Healing and Stress Fractures:** Athletes suffering from stress fractures can benefit from NIR light therapy, which penetrates deeper tissues to stimulate osteoblast activity and accelerate bone consolidation [14, 15].
- **Sleep Quality and Circadian Rhythm:** Adequate sleep is paramount for athletic recovery. Systemic PBM, particularly in the evening, has been shown to modulate melatonin production and improve sleep quality and serum endurance markers [18].

3.2. Neurological and Brain Health

Transcranial PBM (tPBM) uses NIR light to penetrate the skull, targeting the cerebral cortex.

- **Neurodegenerative Diseases:** Research indicates PBM may slow the progression of Alzheimer's and Parkinson's by reducing neuroinflammation and proteotoxicity [9, 10].
- **Concussion and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury (mTBI):** Emerging evidence suggests transcranial NIR PBM can penetrate the skull to reduce neuroinflammation, improve cerebral blood flow, and enhance cognitive recovery in athletes suffering from concussions [16, 17].
- **Stroke Recovery:** Clinical trials have shown improved motor recovery and reduced infarct size when PBM is applied in the sub-acute phase following ischemic events [13].
- **Neuropathic Pain:** RLT effectively downregulates pain signaling pathways and promotes nerve regeneration in conditions like diabetic neuropathy and sciatica [22].

3.3. Mental Health and Mood Disorders

- **Depression and Anxiety:** By improving mitochondrial function in the prefrontal cortex and modulating the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, PBM has shown promise as an adjunct treatment for Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) [14, 15].

3.4. Orthopedics, rheumatology and chronic pain management

- **Spinal Health:** PBM is highly effective for chronic low back pain and cervical spondylosis by reducing nerve root inflammation and promoting discogenic repair [16].
- **Fibromyalgia:** Systemic and localized PBM has been shown to reduce "tender point" sensitivity and improve the quality of life in patients with chronic myofascial pain syndromes [17, 18].
- **Rheumatology and Joint Pain:** PBM is an evidence-based adjunct for osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis, reducing joint effusion, alleviating pain, and improving mobility [21].

3.5. Endocrinology and Metabolism

- **Hashimoto's Thyroiditis:** Studies have demonstrated that NIR application to the thyroid gland can reduce the need for levothyroxine and lower thyroid peroxidase (TPO) antibodies [19].
- **Diabetic Complications:** Beyond wound healing, PBM is used to treat peripheral neuropathy, reducing pain and restoring sensation in the lower extremities [20, 21].

3.6. Dermatology and Aesthetics

- **Trichology:** Red light (650 nm) is FDA-cleared for treating androgenetic alopecia, stimulating hair follicle stem cells into the anagen (growth) phase [22].
- **Wound Healing:** PBM accelerates the closure of diabetic ulcers, surgical incisions, and burns, while also improving dermatological conditions like severe acne and photoaging [19, 20].
- **Psoriasis and Dermatitis:** The anti-inflammatory effects of PBM help modulate the immune response in the skin, reducing plaque thickness and pruritus [23].

3.7. Otolaryngology

- **Anti-inflammatory Effect:** Intranasal and external PBM (660 nm) reduces the release of histamine and pro-inflammatory cytokines in the nasal mucosa [26].
- **Ciliary Function:** PBM improves mucociliary clearance, helping the sinuses drain more effectively and reducing the frequency of sinus infections [27].

- **Symptom Management:** Clinical trials have demonstrated that PBM significantly reduces nasal congestion, rhinorrhea, and sneezing in patients resistant to standard pharmacological treatments [26, 28].

4. Treatment Protocols and Dosimetry

One of the most appealing aspects of RLT is its safety profile. It is non-invasive, non-thermal (unlike surgical lasers), and free from the damaging ionizing radiation associated with UV light.

However, clinicians must be aware of the biphasic dose response (the Arndt-Schulz curve). This principle dictates that insufficient energy density (Joules/cm²) yields no biological effect, an optimal dose stimulates maximum benefit, but excessive dosing can inhibit cellular function or negate the positive effects entirely [2]. Therefore, precise calculation of irradiance, wavelength, and treatment time is critical for achieving reproducible clinical outcomes.

Table 1 - treatment protocols and dosimetry

Category	**Clinical Indication**	**Preferred Wavelength(s)**	**Target Fluence (Dose)**	**Protocol & Frequency**
Athletics	**Pre-conditioning (Ergogenic)**	660nm + 850nm	2–6 J/cm² per muscle	5–15 min immediately prior to exercise.
	Post-Exercise Recovery	660nm + 850nm	4–10 J/cm² per muscle	Within 2 hours post-exercise.

	Ligament/Tendon Injury	810nm–904nm (NIR)	10–20 J/cm²	3x per week; contact application.
	Bone/Stress Fractures	830nm–850nm (NIR)	10–15 J/cm²	Daily or 4x per week over site.
Neurology	**Transcranial (TBI/Cognition)**	810nm or 1064nm	30–60 J/cm² (at skin)	2–3x per week; targeting cortex.
	Peripheral Neuropathy	660nm + 850nm	6–10 J/cm²	3x per week; targeting extremities.
	Stroke Recovery	810nm (NIR)	10–40 J/cm²	Under clinical supervision; sub-acute phase.
Otolaryngology	**Allergic Rhinitis**	660nm (Red)	2–5 J/cm²	Intranasal; 1–2x daily for 2 weeks.
	Chronic Sinusitis	660nm + 830nm	5–10 J/cm²	External application over paranasal sinuses.

Mental Health	**Depression/Anxiety**	810nm–850nm	20–40 J/cm²	Transcranial (Prefrontal Cortex); 2x weekly.
Endocrinology	**Hashimoto's Thyroiditis**	830nm (NIR)	5–10 J/cm²	Directly over thyroid; 2x weekly for 5–10 weeks.
Dermatology	**Wound Healing/Scars**	630nm–660nm	2–4 J/cm²	3–5x per week until tissue closure.
	Hair Regrowth (Alopecia)	650nm (Red)	2–4 J/cm²	3x per week for 15–20 minutes.
	Psoriasis/Eczema	630nm + 830nm	4–8 J/cm²	2–3x per week; monitoring for sensitivity.
Chronic Pain	**Fibromyalgia (Systemic)**	660nm + 850nm	10–20 J/cm² (Total)	Full-body panel; 3x per week.
	Osteoarthritis (Joints)	810nm–850nm	10–15 J/cm²	Targeted contact on joint; 3x per week.

	Chronic Low Back Pain	810–904 nm	10–20 J/cm²	3x per week

5. Clinical Implementation Guidelines

- **Direct Contact:** For deep tissue injuries, applying the LED or laser device directly to the skin (with light pressure) minimizes reflection and maximizes penetration.
- **Systemic Panels:** Full-body LED panels are ideal for general recovery and sleep modulation, typically requiring 10–20 minute sessions at a distance of 6–12 inches.
- **Consistency:** PBM works cumulatively. Acute conditions require daily application for 1–2 weeks, while chronic conditions benefit from 2–3 sessions weekly over several months.
- **Pulsing vs. Continuous Wave:** While continuous wave is standard, pulsing (e.g., 10Hz or 40Hz) is being studied for specific neurological benefits related to brain wave entrainment [25].
- **Irradiance (mW/cm2):** Always check the power output of your device. A device with higher irradiance requires less time to reach the target J/cm2 (Dose).
- **The Depth Factor:** Use Red light (660nm) for superficial issues like skin and sinuses. Use Near-Infrared (810–850nm) for deep tissues like the brain, thyroid, and muscle groups.
- **Safety:** Always provide eye protection (goggles) when using high-powered lasers or panels near the face, especially for sinus or transcranial treatments.

6. Safety profile and contradictions to RLT

PBM is generally classified by the FDA as a "low-risk" or "wellness" device, provided it is used within the established dosimetry parameters [1, 24].

6.1. Contradictions to RLT include:

- **Active Malignancy:** PBM should not be applied directly over a known primary tumor or secondary metastasis. Since RLT stimulates cellular proliferation and angiogenesis, there is a theoretical risk it could encourage the growth of cancer cells [19, 20].

- **Pregnancy:** While there is no evidence of harm, there is a lack of safety data regarding light application over the pregnant uterus. Treatment on peripheral areas (e.g., an ankle sprain) is generally considered safe.
- **Epilepsy (Pulsed Light):** Patients with photosensitive epilepsy should avoid devices that use pulsing frequencies (especially in the 5–30 Hz range), as this can trigger seizures.
- **Thyroid Conditions (Pre-Consultation):** While PBM is used to treat Hashimoto's, it can acutely increase thyroid hormone output. Patients with hyperthyroidism (Graves' Disease) should avoid neck application [19].
- **Photosensitizing Medications:** Patients taking drugs that increase light sensitivity (e.g., Tetracycline, Amiodarone, or certain St. John's Wort supplements) should be monitored for exaggerated skin responses.

6.2. Potential Side Effects

Side effects are rare and typically mild, often occurring if the Arndt-Schulz "optimal dose" is exceeded:

- **Temporary Fatigue or Headache:** Often reported after transcranial or full-body treatment, likely due to the systemic release of metabolic byproducts or changes in cerebral blood flow [9, 14].
- **Initial Increase in Pain:** In chronic conditions, a temporary "healing crisis" or flare-up of pain may occur after the first session due to increased microcirculation and nerve signaling.
- **Mild Redness (Erythema):** Localized temporary redness due to increased vasodilation.
- **Insomnia:** If used late at night, the brightness of the light (particularly the blue or bright red spectrum) may suppress melatonin and interfere with the circadian rhythm [18].

7. Discussion

The therapeutic potential of PBM lies in its ability to address the root cause of many clinical pathologies: mitochondrial dysfunction and chronic inflammation. Unlike many pharmacological interventions that "mask" symptoms—such as NSAIDs for pain which can actually inhibit the early stages of tissue repair—PBM facilitates the body’s natural regenerative processes [1, 6].

One of PBM's greatest strengths lies in its versatility. In sports medicine, it provides both pre-conditioning and post-exercise recovery, optimizing performance while mitigating muscle damage and fatigue [8-13]. In neurology, transcranial PBM shows promise for cognitive enhancement, concussion management, and neurodegenerative disease modulation [9-10]. Chronic pain syndromes, including fibromyalgia and osteoarthritis, can also benefit through improved mitochondrial resilience and reduced neuroinflammation [16-18, 21]. Even mental health conditions, such as depression and anxiety, demonstrate responsiveness to targeted PBM, likely due to improved cortical mitochondrial function and HPA axis modulation [14-15].

Nevertheless, the clinical implementation of PBM faces hurdles, primarily regarding the "biphasic dose response" [2]. Practitioners must navigate the narrow therapeutic window where the energy density (J/cm2) is sufficient to stimulate but not so high that it causes inhibitory effects. This challenge is compounded by the variety of delivery methods, from handheld lasers to full-body LED panels. While lasers offer high-intensity target specificity for deep tissues (like the hip joint), LED arrays allow for systemic treatment of inflammation and mood [25]. What is more, the "bystander effect" suggests that even localized treatment on a limb may provide systemic anti-inflammatory benefits, though the exact mechanisms of this blood-borne signaling require further longitudinal study [8]. Moving toward personalized medicine, which is luckily gaining more and more recognition nowadays, PBM stands out as a modular tool that can be adjusted based on tissue depth, patient melanin levels, and the specific stage of injury (acute vs. chronic).

Photobiomodulation (PBM) represents a paradigm shift in non-pharmacological therapy, as it directly targets mitochondrial bioenergetics, a central hub of cellular function. By stimulating cytochrome c oxidase and enhancing ATP production, PBM not only accelerates local tissue repair but also triggers systemic anti-inflammatory and regenerative cascades. The concept of a "bystander effect" illustrates how localized light application may produce benefits far beyond the irradiated tissue, potentially modulating circulating cytokines and neurotrophic factors.

In short, PBM bridges the gap between traditional physiotherapy, cutting-edge neurology, and holistic systemic medicine, offering a truly integrative approach. The potential for combining PBM with exercise, rehabilitation, or pharmacotherapy represents an exciting frontier in both preventive and restorative medicine.

8. Conclusions

Red light therapy has transitioned from an experimental tool into a mainstream, evidence-based therapeutic modality across multiple medical disciplines. By precisely modulating mitochondrial activity, oxidative stress, and inflammatory signaling, PBM addresses the root causes of many conditions rather than merely alleviating symptoms.

In the realm of sports medicine, PBM enhances performance, accelerates muscle and tendon repair, reduces DOMS, and promotes rapid recovery, enabling athletes to train harder, recover faster, and prevent injuries. In neurology, transcranial and peripheral applications offer neuroprotective effects, improve cognitive recovery post-trauma, and potentially slow the progression of neurodegenerative diseases. Chronic pain syndromes, including low back pain, fibromyalgia, and joint inflammation, respond favorably, demonstrating PBM's capacity to restore function without the side effects associated with long-term pharmacotherapy.

Furthermore, systemic applications of PBM - including endocrine modulation, dermatologic regeneration, and circadian rhythm optimization - illustrate its remarkable adaptability. The technology's non-invasive nature, excellent safety profile, and multi-systemic benefits make it a compelling addition to both clinical practice and performance optimization programs.

Ultimately, the success of PBM hinges on precision: appropriate wavelength selection, accurate energy dosing, correct treatment frequency, and an understanding of tissue-specific light penetration. As research expands and devices become more sophisticated, PBM is poised to become an indispensable cornerstone in personalized medicine, blending cutting-edge science with practical, real-world therapeutic applications.

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