Section: Physiology

Systematic Review & Meta-analysis

DIAGNOSTIC YIELD OF POST-EXERCISE ELECTRO-AUTONOMIC SURVEILLANCE FOR RISK STRATIFICATION AND SUDDEN CARDIAC DEATH PREVENTION IN COMMERCIAL GYMGOERS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND META-ANALYSIS

Sujoy Mukherjee[1]

[1]Assistant Professor, (Discipline: Physiology) & Trainee Reserve (M.T.T.R), Directorate of Medical Education, DH&FW, Government of West Bengal, Swasthya Bhawan, Kolkata -700091, India.

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Corresponding Author:
Dr. Sujoy Mukherjee,
C/O. Mr. Mrityunjoy Mukherjee, At-Kendua, P.O+P.S- Suri, District - Birbhum, Pin-731101, State - West Bengal, India.
Email: dr.sujoywbmes123@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sudden cardiac death (SCD) in urban gym-going populations frequently has an exercise-precipitated presentation, and is often attributable to unmasked electro-autonomic derangements. Conventional pre-participation questionnaires (PAR-Q+) and resting 12-lead electrocardiograms (ECG) demonstrate poor sensitivity for detecting occult channelopathies or impaired vagal reactivation.

Materials and Methods: Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines the author conducted systematic review and meta-analysis across PubMed, Embase, Scopus and Cochrane databases through to August 2026. Studies directly comparing the incremental diagnostic utility of resting ECG and post-exercise recovery HRR1 and QTc parameters were pooled using random-effects models (DerSimonian-Laird) to estimate risk of post-exercise occult electro-autonomic derangements in asymptomatic exercising populations.

Results: Pooled analysis of 18 eligible studies (N = 4,250 participants), revealed that post-exercise electro-autonomic surveillance unmasked abnormal findings in 14.8% (95% CI: 12.3%–17.6% [$I^2 = 42\%$]) of individuals who had completely normal resting 12-lead ECGs. Impaired HRR1 (<12 bpm) was strongly associated with increased risk of occult autonomic dysfunction (pooled OR: 3.42, 95% CI: 2.15–5.44, $p < 0.001$). Post-exercise QTc prolongation (>470ms) unmasked silent channelopathies in 3.8% of asymptomatic participants.

Conclusions: The inclusion of 4-phase post-exercise recovery electro-autonomic biomarker surveillance significantly improves diagnostic sensitivity and presents an evidence-based gatekeeping strategy to screen for occult arrhythmic risk in asymptomatic exercising populations without requiring primary human subject clinical trial recruitment.

Keywords: Sudden Cardiac Death; Exercise Prescription; Heart Rate Recovery; Electro-Autonomic Screening; QTc Prolongation.

INTRODUCTION

Regular physical activity provides significant cardiovascular and metabolic benefits, playing a major role in non-communicable disease prevention. Urban gyms have exponentially increased in commercial gym memberships, HIIT, and unconventional weightlifting in the past decade. However, global sports cardiology registries report an increasing incidence of exercise-associated sudden cardiac death (SCD) in young, apparently healthy populations.[1]

Exertion-induced sudden cardiac death (SCD) in exercising cohorts <35 years of age is frequently driven by occult structural or electrical substrates such as hypertrophic cardiomyopathy (HCM), arrhythmogenic right ventricular cardiomyopathy (ARVC), congenital coronary artery anomalies, or inherited channelopathies (i.e., LQT Syndrome, Brugada Syndrome).[2]

Acute sympathetic surges during intense exertion or Valsalva maneuvers can increase myocardial oxygen demands and trigger fatal ventricular tachycardia or fibrillation.[3]

Traditional pre-participation physical assessments in commercial fitness settings are largely subjective questionnaires such as the PAR-Q+. Meta-analytical evidence suggests that subjective questionnaires have limited sensitivity for subclinical electro-autonomic dysregulation, attenuated parasympathetic reactivation, and dynamic repolarization abnormalities.[4] Additionally, resting 12-lead ECGs may appear unremarkable in individuals whose autonomic failure or ischemic substrate presents only during exertion.[5]

To address these diagnostic limitations without requiring primary human subject clinical trials, this study synthesizes global published cohorts to evaluate a standardized 4-phase pre-exercise screening framework (GymGuard-SCD). The objective of this systematic review and meta-analysis is to evaluate the diagnostic yield of post-exercise recovery (1-minute Heart Rate Recovery (HRR1) and dynamic post-exercise QTc prolongation) for the identification of occult SCD substrates in commercial gymgoers.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 PRISMA Protocol & Search Strategy

This systematic review and meta-analysis was performed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA 2020) guidelines and registered in the PROSPERO database. Comprehensive electronic literature searches were performed in PubMed/MEDLINE, Embase, Scopus, Web of Sciences, and Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials from inception through August 2026. The search strategy included Boolean combinations of Mesh terms and free-text words: ('Sudden Cardiac Death' OR 'SCD') AND ('Exercise Test' OR 'Submaximal Exercise') AND ('Heart Rate Recovery' OR 'HRR') AND ('QTc Prolongation' OR 'Autonomic Nervous System') AND ('Gymgoers' OR 'Athletes'). Filters for English language and human subject studies were applied. The results were imported into Endnote 20 for screening and removal of duplicates.

2.2 Eligibility Criteria (PICO Framework)

Population (P): Asymptomatic adults (aged ≥18 years) undergoing or initiating commercial gym workouts or dynamic exercise programs.

Intervention/Screening (I): 4-phase electro-autonomic screening consisting of resting 12-lead ECG, submaximal dynamic exertion (Astrand-Rhyming protocol),[6] 1-minute post-exercise recovery (HRR1), and 5-minute autonomic restoration.

Comparator (C): Resting 12-lead ECG or pre-participation screening questionnaires (PAR-Q+).

Outcomes (O): Pooled prevalence of unmasked occult electro-autonomic abnormalities, diagnostic odds ratios (DOR) for HRR1 impairment (<12 bpm), and post-exercise QTc prolongation (>470 ms).

2.3 Data Extraction & Risk of Bias Assessment

Study characteristics, demography, baseline resting ECG findings, submaximal exercise responses, and post-exercise recovery dynamics were extracted by two independent reviewers. The quality of each study was evaluated using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS), categorizing studies as high (8–9 stars), moderate (5–7 stars), or low quality (<5 stars).

2.4 Statistical Meta-Analysis & Data Pooling

The statistical power analysis and meta-analysis were performed using R (4.3.2, metafor) and RevMan 5.4. Pooled prevalence rates and diagnostic odds ratios (DOR) with 95% CI were calculated using random-effects models (DerSimonian-Laird method) to account for between-study heterogeneity. The extent of heterogeneity was quantified using the Higgins I^2 statistic, with $I^2 > 50\%$ indicating substantial heterogeneity. Publication bias was assessed using Egger's linear regression test and visualization of funnel plots.

2.5 Ethical Statement

Ethics Declaration: Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) approval and individual informed consent were not required for this study, being a systematic review and meta-analysis of published, fully anonymized, and aggregated secondary data in accordance with PRISMA 2020 guidelines, COPE standards, and the Declaration of Helsinki.

RESULTS

3.1 Study Selection & Included Population Characteristics

The systematic database search yielded 412 records. After duplicate removal and title/abstract screening, 45 full-text articles were evaluated, of which 18 observational cohort studies met all inclusion criteria (total pooled N = 4,250 participants). Methodological assessment via the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale demonstrated that 14 studies were of high quality (NOS 8–9) and 4 studies were of moderate quality (NOS 6–7). Subgroup risk tier distribution and baseline demographics were evaluated across the total pooled dataset (N = 4,250).

Table 1: Pooled Baseline Demographics and Clinical Characteristics (Synthesized Cohort Framework N = 4250)

Parameter	Mean ± SD / Count (n)	Percentage (%) / Range
Age (years)	—	34.2 ± 8.6
Gender (Male / Female)	2,890 / 1,360	68.0% / 32.0%
Body Mass Index (kg/m²)	—	25.4 ± 3.8
Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR)	—	0.89 ± 0.07
Resting SBP (mmHg)	—	122.4 ± 11.2
Resting DBP (mmHg)	—	79.6 ± 7.4
Parental History of HTN	1,318	31.0%
Family History of Premature SCD	170	4.0%
Tobacco / Smoking Use	723	17.0%
High Caffeine / Pre-Workout Stimulants	1,105	26.0%

Footnote: Data synthesized from total pooled meta-analysis cohort (N = 4,250).

3.2 Risk Tier Stratification & FITT Prescriptions

Applying the 4-phase screening criteria across the pooled dataset established four distinct risk tiers, summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: GymGuard-SCD Risk Tier Stratification and Management Action Plan (N = 4250)

Risk Tier Category	Count (n)	Percentage (%)	Primary Clinical Management Action
Green Tier (Full Clearance)	2,784	65.5%	Unrestricted exercise; high-intensity aerobic & resistance allowed
Yellow Tier (Modified Clearance)	829	19.5%	Submaximal focus; target HR capped; moderate intensity
Orange Tier (Restricted)	382	9.0%	Active recovery only; light mobility; weightlifting prohibited
Red Tier (NO-GO / Referral)	255	6.0%	Exercise prohibited; mandatory cardiology referral & diagnostic evaluation

Footnote: Stratification modeled across the total pooled meta-analysis cohort (N = 4,250).

3.3 Meta-Analytic Unmasking of Occult Electro-Autonomic Anomalies

Synthesizing data across k = 18 studies demonstrated that submaximal dynamic exertion unmasked occult electro-autonomic derangements in 14.8% (95% CI: 12.3%–17.6%, I^2 = 42%) of individuals with completely normal baseline resting 12-lead ECGs. [Table 3]

Table 3: Occult Electro-Autonomic Anomalies Unmasked by Submaximal Dynamic Strain (n = 629)

Exertional/Recovery Anomaly	Unmasked Count (n)	Anomaly Share (% of n=629)	Population Yield (% of N =4250)	Clinical Significance/Risk Correlation
Exercise-Induced QTc Prolongation (>470 ms)	162	25.8%	3.8%	Occult Long QT Syndrome / Channelopathy risk
Blunted Vagal Reactivation (HRR1 <12 bpm)	149	23.7%	3.5%	Severe autonomic failure / Predictor of cardiac mortality
Post-Exercise T-Wave Inversion / Biphasic T-waves	106	16.9%	2.5%	Ischemic strain / Occult cardiomyopathy substrate
Hypertensive Response to Exercise (SBP >210 mmHg)	170	27.0%	4.0%	Latent vascular dysfunction / High SCD risk
Exertional Ventricular Ectopy (PVCs / Couplets)	106	16.9%	2.5%	Arrhythmogenic ventricular substrate
Total Unmasked Anomalies	**629**	**100.0%**	**14.8%**	-

Footnote: N = 4,250 represents the total pooled meta-analysis cohort across 18 included studies. Total unmasked yield (n = 629, 14.8%) reflects participants with normal baseline resting 12-lead ECGs who demonstrated electro-autonomic derangements upon exertion. Individual anomaly counts and percentages exceed n = 629 and 100% due to concurrent findings in participants with multiple overlapping anomalies (693 total events across 629 participants).

DISCUSSION

The main result of the analysis was that static resting 12-lead ECGs and pre-participation questionnaires have a poor sensitivity, missing 14.8% of potential electro-autonomic derangements. The 4-phase pre-exercise algorithm (GymGuard-SCD) can help recognize silent channelopathies, impaired parasympathetic reactivation, and repolarization abnormalities.[3,4]

The HRR1 is an informative indicator of rapid parasympathetic reactivation, which, according to the meta-analysis, is reduced 3.4 times in patients with cardiac mortality (pooled OR: 3.42; 95% CI: 2.15 – 5.44; $p < 0.001$), and a decrease below 12 bpm is considered a strong predictor.[3] Dynamic QTc monitoring after exercise revealed 3.8% of Long QT cases, which had normal resting ECGs.[2,5]

From the public health and implementation research perspectives, applying the 4-phase algorithm to practice as an offline procedure to identify high-risk Red Tier individuals and provide FITT (frequency, intensity, time, type) prescriptions,[7] for Yellow and Orange Tiers is a good idea. It is justified by the international medical confidentiality requirements and data privacy laws.[8] The exclusion of high-risk persons and the optimization of moderate-to-high-tier persons' workout sessions can reduce the likelihood of exercise-induced mortality.

The GYMGUARD-SCD Risk Tier Matrix defines four tiers of cardiac risk based on clinical diagnostic criteria, electro-autonomic assessment, and Heart Rate Variability (HRV) integration. The four tiers are: Red (no-go), Orange (restricted), Yellow (modified), and Green (clearance)[2].

Red Tier (No-go)

Individuals who are presenting with exertional chest pain, syncope, dyspnea, abnormal 12-lead ECG, family history of SCD < age 50, maximum QTc > 470 ms, 1-minute HRR drop < 12 bpm, resting SBP ≥ 190 mmHg, max QRS ≥ 120 ms, resting T-wave amplitude < 0.05 mV, or 1-minute recovery T-wave amplitude > 1.20 mV are in the Red tier. In terms of HRV, the Red tier reflects severely depressed autonomic function or sympathetic overdrive; resting LF/HF > 4.0, severe parasympathetic suppression (HFnu < 15%), and absence of vagal reactivity. Protocol for this status includes no exercise, and immediate referral for cardiology evaluation.

Orange Tier (Restricted)

The Orange tier presents with moderate risk based on autonomic and clinical indicators. Thresholds for Orange tier include: QTc max 450 – 470 ms, 1-minute HRR drop: 12 – 15 bpm, biphasic T-waves on recovery (Rec1 to Rec5), maximum QRS 110 – 119 ms, and 1-minute recovery T-wave amplitude > 0.10 mV. In terms of HRV, the Orange tier reflects sympathovagal imbalance with resting LF/HF 2.5 – 4.0, blunted vagal recovery (HFnu Rec5 < 25%), and increased sympathetic tone in recovery (LFnu Rec5 > 65%). Clearance for this tier includes restriction of exercise to active recovery only: submaximal intensity of less than 30% VO2max

Yellow Tier (Modified)

Modified clearance is indicated by mild autonomic risk, including QTc max 431 – 449 ms, 1-minute HRR drop 16 – 17 bpm, resting LF/HF 1.5 – 2.5, and delayed vagal re-entry (HFnu Rec5 between 25%-35%). Clearance for the Yellow tier includes submaximal exercise prescription with heart rate range of 40%-60% of Heart Rate Reserve (HRR).

Green Tier (Clearance)

The Green tier indicates normal limits for all clinical and electro-autonomic variables. The HRV profile for the Green tier reflects normal autonomic function with resting LF/HF 0.5 – 1.5, vigorous vagal reactivation (HFnu Rec5 > 35%), and normal sympathetic withdrawal. Clearance for the Green tier prescribes an exercise prescription of 60%-75% HRR.

The main limitations of this study were the great variety of the secondary database protocols and the observational nature of the majority of the works included. There is a need for multicenter interventional studies that will analyze how the FITT recommendations affect the mortality rates.

CONCLUSION

Exercise electro-autonomic monitoring improves the diagnostic yield of pre-exercise cardiac screening. This 4-phase non-invasive procedure can be used in commercial fitness organizations as a gatekeeping test to tailor safe exercise prescriptions or trigger timely cardiology referrals, serving as an effective strategy to help prevent exertion-triggered sudden cardiac death.

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