# INFLUENCE OF HAEMATOLOGICAL PROFILE ON THE EXERCISE CAPACITY OF CHILDREN WITH SICKLE CELL DISEASE IN KANO

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## ABSTRACT

The Exercise Capacity (ExC) of children with sickle cell disease (SCD) may be influenced negatively by both haematological and environmental factors. This study aimed to assess the influence of haematological profile on the ExC of children with SCD in Kano and to ascertain the safety of conducting 6 minute walk test (6MWT) on those children. In the cross-sectional survey, 162 children were recruited from Murtala Mohammed Specialist Hospital, Kano. Each of them walked to-and-fro for 6 minutes on a 10 meter marked level floor at their own walking pace in order to determine their actual 6 minute walk distance (6MWD). The actual 6MWD was compared with a predicted one in order to determine their ExC. Full blood count was used to evaluate haematological profiles. The data were analysed with Pearson product moment correlation and unpaired t test, at a level of significance of p<0.05 using SPSS version 20. Results showed that seventy (70) males (43.2%) and ninety two (92) females (56.8%) with mean age of 10.7±3.27 years took part in the study. The actual 6MWD was 366.20 m ± 59.88m (95%CI=356.91m - 375.49m) which was 59.17% of the predicted one. ExC correlated with each of White blood cell count (WBC) (r= - 0.22; p=0.005), Sex (r= - 0.27; p=0.001) and age (r=0.19; p=0.013). None of the participants experienced exercise-induced vaso-occlusive crisis during or immediately after the 6MWT. It was concluded that infection (signified by increased WBC count) and female gender have negative influence on ExC. 6MWT is safe to be performed by children with SCD.

Key words: Sickle Cell Disease, Haematological Profile, Exercise Capacity, Six Minute Walk Test

## INTRODUCTION

Sickle Cell Disease (SCD) is an inherited hemoglobinopathy (Chirico et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2018) that affects millions of people worldwide (Tsaras et al., 2009). The disorder is most commonly found among the people living in the sub-Saharan Africa (Tsaras et al., 2009; Mitchell, 2018). It occurs when a hydrophobic valine replaces a hydrophilic glutamic acid (Mitchell, 2018) at the sixth position on the beta globin chain on chromosome 11 (Steinberg, 2006) giving rise to abnormal hemoglobin (HbS) which is less soluble when deoxygenated (Mitchell, 2018). The increasing need for more oxygen supply to active muscles during strenuous (anaerobic) exercise may initiate metabolic changes that lead to HbS polymerization, sickling of red blood cell (RBC), vascular occlusion and endothelial damage (Tsaras et al., 2009; Waltz et al., 2012).

In SCD, strenuous exercise decreases arterial oxygen concentration leading to acidosis, excess lactate formation and intravascular sickling (Connes et al., 2011). It has however been revealed that RBC stiffness is only possible with the combined effects of deoxygenation and low pH (Xuet et al., 2016). Strenuous exercise also leads to dehydration, hyperthermia (Tsaras et al., 2009, Mitchell, 2018), rhabdomyolysis, splenic infarction (Thompson, 2013), and sudden death (Tsaras et al., 2009, Fajardo and Tchandja, 2015; Mitchell, 2018).
Sudden death can stem from conducting strenuous exercise in high altitude (Mitchell, 2018), rhabdomyolysis, heat stroke, acute renal failure, intravascular coagulation (Tsaras et al., 2009, Mitchell, 2018), dehydration (Mitchell, 2018) and cardiac dysrhythmia (Tsaras et al., 2009; Fajardo and Tchandja, 2015). Due to the aforementioned severe complications that are associated with strenuous exercise in SCD, clinicians have rarely prescribed exercise to individuals with SCD.

On a positive note, studies have however found that engaging in regular moderate intensity exercise is beneficial rather than harmful in patients with SCD (Chirico et al., 2012; Waltz et al., 2012; Messonnier et al., 2012; Faes et al., 2014; Hedreville et al., 2014). Moderate intensity exercise was found to decrease oxidative stress (Chirico et al., 2012; Faes et al., 2014; Chirico et al., 2016, Martin et al., 2018) inflammation and endothelial damage (Faes et al., 2014) and improved nitric oxide bioavailability (Martin et al., 2018). Moderate intensity exercise did not alter autonomic nervous system activity negatively (Hedreville et al., 2014) and it decreased microcirculatory flow abnormalities (Waltz et al., 2012). Beneficial exercise to individuals with SCD has to be aerobic (Tsaras et al., 2009; Connes et al., 2011), symptom limited, with adequate hydration (Tsaras et al., 2009; Tripette et al., 2010; Connes et al., 2011) and not to be conducted under adverse weather conditions (Jones et al., 2005; Connes et al., 2011). The aim of this study was to assess the influence of hematological variables on the Exercise Capacity (ExC.) of children with SCD and to determine the safety of conducting 6 minute walk test (6MWT) with the view to help physiotherapist prescribe exercises that are safe to the patients with SCD in a city that could experience extreme of weather conditions.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The study was a cross-sectional descriptive survey in which 162 children and adolescents with SCD, seventy males (43.2%) and ninety two females (56.8%) took part in the study. They were recruited from the out-patient SCD clinic in Murtala Mohammed Specialist Hospital, Kano using purposive sampling technique. The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Kano State Ministry of Health and the consent of participants, and that of their caregivers, as the case applied, was sought and obtained. The height and weight of participants were measured using standard procedures; oxygen saturation was assessed with finger pulse oximeter. Blood samples were collected for FBC using auto-analyser (Sysmex XP-300, Germany) (Akinbami et al., 2012). The safety of the 6MWT was determined based on the presence or absence of crises during or after the exercise test. Occurrence of crises was score ‘0’ point and absence of crises was scored ‘1’ point.

**Procedure for conducting 6MWT**

The test was performed in a well-ventilated gymnasium 14-meter long between 9am and 1pm daily. Each participant was instructed to stand and keep walking at his/her own pace to the 10 meters line and then return to the 0 meter repeatedly for 6 minutes. The total distance covered during the 6MWT by each of the patients was recorded as the actual six minute walk distance (6MWD).

All precautions to guard against development of crises have been adhered to very strictly. The patients have being on routine medical care (and also on hydroxy-urea) and free of frequent vaso-occlusive crises at least in the last 3 months. The exercise was totally aerobic and symptom limited (i.e. exercise being terminated when symptoms of muscle cramping, fatigue, and shortness of breath ensues) with adequate hydration before and after the exercise and the training was conducted in a well-ventilated and conducive environment.

**Determination of ExC**

Participants that covered longer distance during the 6MWT (or have higher value of 6MWD) were regarded as having better ExC. However, ExC could also be categorised as normal, moderately decreased or severely altered by comparing the actual 6MWD for each patient with a predicted 6MWD (Dedeken et al., 2014). The predicted 6MWD was obtained using the standard regression equation below:

**Males**

\[
\text{Predicted 6MWD} = 196.72 + (39.81 \times \text{Age}) - (1.36 \times \text{Age}^2) + (132.28 \times \text{Height})
\]

**Females**

\[
\text{Predicted 6MWD} = 188.61 + (51.50 \times \text{Age}) - (1.86 \times \text{Age}^2) + (86.10 \times \text{Height})
\]

1. When the actual 6MWD was greater than 80% of the predicted 6MWD = Normal ExC
2. When the actual 6MWD was between 60% - 80% of the predicted 6MWD = Moderately decreased ExC
3. When the actual 6MWD was less than 60% of the predicted 6MWD = Severely Altered ExC (Dedeken et al., 2014).
Data Analysis
The data were summarised with descriptive statistics and analysed with inferential statistics of Pearson product moment correlation and unpaired t test, at a level of significance of p<0.05 using SPSS version 20. It was not possible to conduct inferential statistics on the safety of 6MWT because none of the participants had any crises during the exercise.

RESULTS
The mean age and body mass index of the participants were of 10.7±3.27 years and 13.44 ± 1.79 kg/m² respectively. The mean 6MWD covered by the participants was 366.20 m ± 59.88m. The average value of their predicted 6MWD was 618.93 m ± 48.09m. This implies that the study participants were able to exercise at 59.17% of their predicted ExC. Only 2 (1.2%) had Normal Exc, 80 (49.4%) had moderately altered Exc and 80 (49.4%) severely altered Exc. With regards to the safety of conducting 6MWT, none of the participants experienced any exercise-related clinical sign of vaso-occlusive crisis during and immediately after the exercise.

Correlation between haematological profile and ExC of participants
Mean values of haematological variables were 95.01 ± 4.43 % for oxygen saturation (SPO2) post exercise, 16.16 ± 6.10 x 10³/µL for white blood cell (WBC) count and 84.73 ± 8.38 fL for mean cell volume (MCV) as presented in Table 1. Furthermore, there was significant negative correlation between ExC and WBC count (P<0.05).

Table 1: Correlation between Exercise Capacity of study participants and Haematological Profiles (N= 162)

| Haematological Profiles                     | Mean ±SD     | r     | p-value |
|---------------------------------------------|--------------|-------|---------|
| Resting Oxygen Saturation(%)                | 95.11 ± 4.72 | 0.27  | 0.73    |
| Oxygen Saturation post 6MWT(%)              | 95.01 ± 4.43 | -0.004| 0.958   |
| WBC(x 10³/µL)                               | 16.16 ± 6.10 | -0.222| 0.005*  |
| RBC(x 10⁶/µL)                               | 2.95 ± 1.78  | 0.44  | 0.581   |
| MCV (fl)                                    | 84.73 ± 8.38fL | 0.049 | 0.537   |
| MCH(pg)                                     | 26.75 ± 3.10 | 0.029 | 0.718   |
| MCHC (g/dL)                                 | 31.48 ± 1.30 | 0.146 | 0.63    |
| PLT (x 10³/µL)                              | 441.56 ±177.92 | 0.74  | 0.334   |
| Haemoglobin Concentration (g/ dL)           | 7.46 ± 1.69  | 0.12  | 0.879   |

Key: * significant; 6MWD= six- minute walk distance; WBC = white blood cell count, RBC= red blood cell, MCV= mean cell volume, MCH= mean cell haemoglobin, MCHC= mean corpuscular haemoglobin concentration, PLT= platelet.

DISCUSSION
Despite the fact that Kano City is known for having adverse weather conditions at specific times of the year, the outcome of this study has revealed that low-moderate intensity aerobic exercise in the form of 6MWT is safe to be performed by individuals with SCD. This is because none of the participants in this study experienced any exercise induced clinical sign of vaso-occlusive crisis both during and immediately after the exercise. The implication of this finding is that the 6MWT can also be used as a form of endurance training for individuals with SCD provided that all the necessary precautions have been observed. A study has also observed that moderate exercise did not adversely affect the functioning of the autonomic nervous system in patients with SCD (Hedreville et al., 2014).

The ExC of the participants in this study is less than sixty percent of the predicted value, and this implies that most of them have severely reduced ExC levels. The finding on the deterioration of ExC in individuals with SCD is in line with the outcomes of other studies (Liem et al., 2009; Minniti et al., 2010; Hostyn et al., 2013; Waltz et al., 2013; Dedeken et al., 2014; Oharaet al., 2014). Previous studies have reported ExC values of 83.26% (Dedeken et al., 2014) and 74.56% (Waltz et al., 2013) of the predicted value which are higher than what was obtained in this study.
This study found that there was significant negative relationship between infection which is represented by increased white blood cells (WBC) count and ExC. An increase in WBC count as observed in this study connotes presence of bacterial or fungal infection. This implies that increased infection episodes will lead to reduction in ExC among individuals with SCD. Individuals with SCD are prone to having functional asplenia and recurrent chest infection. This may lead to reduction in the exercise ability of the patient if not adequately treated. The outcome of this study on infection is in line with the finding of another study where significant relationship was found between increased WBC count (WBC) and ExC (Melo et al., 2017).

Although the other selected haematological variables in this study all have no significant relationship with the ExC of the study participants at least individually, the observed reduction in ExC could probably be associated with the combined influence of the reductions in the concentrations of several haematological variables such as severe reductions in haemoglobin, pack cell volume, RBC, and platelet in majority of the participants. The insignificant relationship between arterial oxygen saturation and ExC may probably be due to the fact that the average value of the arterial oxygen saturation of the study participant is within normal range both at rest and post exercise.

Contrary to the findings in this study, low haemoglobin level had previously been linked with the ExC of individuals with SCD (Setty et al., 2003). Furthermore, significant correlation was also found between RBC deformability and ExC where it was revealed that it is not the total number of RBC that actually counts but the total number of viable ones (un-deformed RBC cells) (Liem et al., 2009). Also, previous studies have found significant correlation between pack cell volume and ExC (Liem et al., 2009; Waltz et al., 2013). In addition, a study found a significant relationship between oxygen saturation and ExC (Hostyn et al., 2013).

Finally, this study found significant relationship between age and ExC. The positive correlation implies that the older the child the better the ExC. Furthermore, this study found that male participants have significantly better ExC than females. It is also possible that based on the positive correlation between age and ExC, males with higher mean age may have better ExC.

It was concluded that low-moderate intensity aerobic exercise in the form of 6MWT is safe to be performed by individuals with SCD and that infection signified by increased WBC count, gender and age have significant influence on the ExC of children and adolescents with SCD in Kano.

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