Exercise in the maintenance of weight loss: health benefits beyond lost weight on the scale

Alysha C D’Souza, Kyle J Lau, Stuart M Phillips

INTRODUCTION
A cavalier description of weight loss is that it only requires overweight people to eat less and move more. Such simplicity is, however, much harder to effect in the practice of obesity treatment.

Liraglutide is a drug used in obesity treatment that induces weight loss primarily through appetite suppression. Lundgren and colleagues used a 2×2 factorial design to examine the role of liraglutide and exercise in the maintenance of weight loss, employing control, exercise, liraglutide, and exercise plus liraglutide groups.1 When compared with the control group, it was found that the combination group was better at maintaining healthy weight loss than either monotherapy. While the study was a landmark, we felt that Lundgren and colleagues underemphasised the importance of exercise during weight-loss maintenance and its impact on other measures of overall health. Simply focusing only on lost weight undermines the numerous health advantages of exercise, including better mental health, the composition of lost weight and, importantly, improved fitness.2

BODY COMPOSITION
Bodyweight comprises two components: fat mass and fat-free mass (FFM), consisting of bone and lean soft-tissue mass.3 Much of the obesity-related disease risk is associated with fat mass and, more specifically, visceral fat, which is an undesirable location to accrue body fat. However, most diet-only weight-loss strategies result in a loss of both fat and FFM. A reduction in FFM, especially skeletal muscle, can have negative metabolic consequences, including weight regain.4 Thus, weight loss and maintenance should focus on changes in body composition and the loss of visceral fat and relative preservation of muscle mass. Compared with placebo, Lundgren et al showed that all active treatment groups were associated with decreases in fat mass and waist circumference; nonetheless, decreases were twice as large in the exercise plus liraglutide group. The exercise group was the only treatment group that showed preserved lean mass when compared with placebo. Additionally, compared with baseline, the exercise group was the only active treatment with increases in lean mass, which may be important for long-term metabolic health and, potentially, to maintain lost weight.4

CARDIOVASCULAR OUTCOMES
Poor cardiorespiratory fitness (CRF), often associated with obesity, is an independent risk factor for cardiovascular disease (CVD) and mortality.5 Thus, people with obesity should be encouraged to increase their physical activity to enhance CRF as it can greatly reduce the adverse effects of excess fat mass and other traditional CVD risk factors even in the absence of weight loss.6 As expected, only the exercise and combination groups exhibited increased CRF.6 In our view, improvements in CRF should be viewed as being virtually equivalent in importance to weight loss itself since increases in CRF are associated with lower rates of all-cause mortality and CVD.1

Resting heart rate (HR) is another risk factor for CVD and all-cause mortality.7 This risk increases continuously with resting HR above 60 beats/min.7 Unsurprisingly, treatment groups began the intervention with an average resting HR above 60 beats/min. Postintervention, the liraglutide group showed an increase in resting HR. This increase was not present in the combination group, likely due to exercise in the treatment strategy. Exercise is an effective way of reducing resting HR, lowering the risk of CVD and mortality.8

PERCEPTION OF WELLNESS
Health encompasses more than just physical health measures. It includes self-perceived health status as well as physical and emotional well-being. Self-perception of poor health is an independent predictor of adverse health-related outcomes, including mortality. While all treatment

---

Discussion

Figure 1  Infographic representation of the main findings from healthy weight loss maintenance with exercise, liraglutide or both combined by Lundgren et al.1

| Weight Loss Maintenance Strategies in women and men after one year |
|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                     | Placebo         | Liraglutide     | Exercise        | Exercise + Liraglutide |
| General Health Perception |

---

Department of Kinesiology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence to Dr Stuart M Phillips, Department of Kinesiology, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario L8S 4L8, Canada; philis@mcmaster.ca

BMJ

Br J Sports Med 2021 Vol 0 No 0
groups successfully maintained their weight-loss postdiet, both the liraglutide and control groups experienced a significant decrease in general health perception; however, this was not observed in the exercise or combination groups, who showed improvements in their emotional well-being.

CONCLUSION
Weight loss, but more importantly, the maintenance of weight loss, is a critical clinical outcome in obesity treatment. As maintenance of weight loss, is a critical concern in clinical practice, further research is warranted to determine the effectiveness of different interventions in promoting weight loss maintenance.

We propose that exercise or liraglutide treatment may be beneficial in promoting weight loss maintenance. Exercise results in improved cardiac health, which may enhance adherence to the treatment and promote long-term weight-loss maintenance. The work of Lundgren et al should be celebrated. Nevertheless, our footnote would be that exercise in conjunction with pharmaceutical interventions is vital to better health beyond lost weight on the scale.

To cite D’Souza AC, Lau KJ, Phillips SM. Br J Sports Med 2021;:1-2. doi:10.1136/bjsports-2021-104754

Open access
This is an open access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC BY-NC 4.0) license, which permits others to distribute, remix, adapt, build upon this work non-commercially, and license their derivative works on different terms, provided the original work is properly cited, any changes made indicated, and the use is non-commercial. See: http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2021. Re-use permitted under CC BY-NC. No commercial re-use. See rights and permissions. Published by BMJ.

REFERENCES
1. Lundgren JR, Janus C, Jensen SBK, et al. Healthy weight loss maintenance with exercise, liraglutide, or both combined. N Engl J Med 2021;384:1719–30.
2. Phillips SM, Joyner MJ. Out-running ‘bad’ diets: beyond weight loss there is clear evidence of the benefits of physical activity. Br J Sports Med 2019;53:854–5.
3. Ho-Pham LI, Nguyen UDT, Nguyen TV. Association between lean mass, fat mass, and bone mineral density: a meta-analysis. J Clin Endocrinol Metab 2014;99:30–8.
4. Josse AR, Atkinson SA, Tamopolsky MA, et al. Increased consumption of dairy foods and protein during diet- and exercise-induced weight loss promotes fat mass loss and lean mass gain in overweight and obese premenopausal women. J Nutr 2011;141:1626–34.
5. Ross R, Blair SN, Arena R, et al. Importance of assessing cardiorespiratory fitness in clinical practice: a case for fitness as a clinical vital sign: a scientific statement from the American heart association. Circulation 2016;134:e99653.
6. Lee D-chul, Artero EG, Sui X, et al. Mortality trends in the general population: the importance of cardiorespiratory fitness. J Psychopharmacol 2010;24:27–35.
7. Fox K, Borer JS, Camm AJ, et al. Resting heart rate in cardiovascular disease. J Am Coll Cardiol 2007;50:823–30.
8. Reimers AK, Knapp G, Reimers C-D. Effects of exercise on the resting heart rate: a systematic review and meta-analysis of interventional studies. J Clin Med 2018;7:503.