The effectiveness of exercise interventions to prevent sports injuries: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised controlled trials

Jeppe Bo Lauersen,1 Ditte Marie Bertelsen,2 Lars Bo Andersen3,4

ABSTRACT
Background  Physical activity is important in both prevention and treatment of many common diseases, but sports injuries can pose serious problems. Objective  To determine whether physical activity exercises can reduce sports injuries and perform stratified analyses of strength training, stretching, proprioception and combinations of these, and provide separate acute and overuse injury estimates. Material and methods  PubMed, EMBASE, Web of Science and SPORTDiscus were searched and yielded 3462 results. Two independent authors selected relevant randomised, controlled trials and quality assessments were conducted by all authors of this paper using the Cochrane collaboration domain-based quality assessment tool. Twelve studies that neglected to account for clustering effects were adjusted. Quantitative analyses were performed in STATA V.12 and sensitivity analyses used intention-to-treat. Heterogeneity (I²) and publication bias (Harbord’s small-study effects) were formally tested. Results  25 trials, including 26 610 participants with 3464 injuries, were analysed. The overall effect estimate on injury prevention was heterogeneous. Stratified exposure analyses proved no beneficial effect for stretching (RR 0.963 (0.846–1.095)), whereas studies with multiple exposures (RR 0.655 (0.520–0.826)), proprioception training (RR 0.550 (0.347–0.869)), and strength training (RR 0.315 (0.207–0.480)) showed a tendency towards increasing effect. Both acute injuries (RR 0.647 (0.502–0.836)) and overuse injuries (RR 0.527 (0.373–0.746)) could be reduced by physical activity programmes. Conclusion  Intention-to-treat sensitivity analyses consistently revealed even more robust effect estimates. Conclusions  Despite a few outlying studies, consistently favourable estimates were obtained for all injury prevention measures except for stretching. Strength training reduced sports injuries to less than 1/3 and overuse injuries could be almost halved.

INTRODUCTION
Increasing evidence exists, for all age groups, that physical activity is important in both prevention and treatment of some of the most sizable conditions of our time,1–3 including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, osteoporosis, and depression. Although overall population levels of physical activity is a general concern, increasing levels of leisure time physical activity and sports participation have been reported in some population groups.4 Injuries are virtually the sole drawback of exercise, but may be a common consequence of physical activity and have been shown to pose substantial problems.5–7 Management of sports injuries is difficult, time-consuming and expensive, both for the society and for the individual.8–10 However, sports injury prevention by different kinds of strength training, proprioception exercises, stretching activities, and combinations of these, is accessible to essentially everyone and requires limited medical staff assistance. This adds several interesting aspects regarding the potential dispersion, applicability, and compliance to these programmes.

Most studies on musculoskeletal injuries have focused on one particular intervention, injury type/location, sport or studied other relatively narrowly defined research questions. This applies to most reviews and meta-analyses as well.11–18 However, Parkkari et al19 described 16 controlled trials in a narrative review. Central concepts of sports injury prevention such as extrinsic (including exposures, environment, equipment) and intrinsic (including physical characteristics, fitness, ability, age, gender, psychology) risk factors and the ‘sequence of prevention’ model of van Mechelen20 were summarised. Aaltonen et al21 presented an overview of all sports injury prevention measures, but as in the literature up until their search in January 2006, the focus of this review was primarily on extrinsic risk factors.22 Recently, and with less restrictive exclusion criteria, Schiff et al23 covered the same topic with additional studies. Aaltonen et al and Schiff et al were unable to obtain full quantification of intervention effect estimates. Steffen et al24 presented a narrative review of acute sports injury prevention written by field experts for each location of injury, but an examination and quantification of specific training exposures and a differentiation of acute and overuse outcome effect estimates is still lacking.

This review and meta-analysis will broaden the scope of previous reviews and meta-analyses on sports injury prevention and focus on the preventive effect of several different forms of physical activity programmes and complement the existing summative literature on extrinsic risk factor reduction. Valuable summary literature exists for both neuromuscular proprioception14 15 and stretching exercises.17 18 However, aggregation of effect estimates and comparison with the effect of strength training and an intervention group with multiple exposures (combing ex strength, proprioception, stretch etc) could reveal new and interesting information, enabling proposals for future directions in the field of sports injury prevention. This study consequently aimed at performing stratified analyses of different injury prevention exercise programmes and additionally provides separate effect estimates for acute and overuse injuries.
MATERIAL AND METHODS
Search strategy and study selection
A review protocol was composed, comprising a priori specification
of analyses, inclusion/exclusion criteria, injury definition
and search strategy. Injury was defined according to the
F-MARC consensus statement for football, merely broadened to
fit all forms of physical activity.25 See online supplements
eMethods1–3 and eFigure 1 for full injury definition, detailed
search entries, study selection description and flow chart.
PubMed, EMBASE, Web of Science and SPORTDiscus databases
were searched to October 2012 with no publication date restric-
tions. The search was performed by four blocks of keywords
related to prevention, injury and diagnoses, sports, and random-
mised controlled trials. The searches were customised to accom-
modate the layout and search methods of each search engine
and the application of additional free text words were based on
the coverage of subject terms. Reference lists of retrieved articles
were hand searched for trials of potential interest and the search
was later updated to January 2013.
Search results yielded 3462 hits, which were screened by title
to yield 90 titles. After exclusion by abstract, 40 were read in
full text and 22 were included. Another three studies were
included from reference lists and updated search. Study selec-
tion followed a priori-specified inclusion and exclusion criteria.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion criteria</th>
<th>Exclusion criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>❯ Primary prevention</td>
<td>❯ Influencing pathology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Free of injury at inclusion</td>
<td>❯ Surrogate measures of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Sports/physical activity injuries</td>
<td>❯ Any use of devices (kinesiotaping,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Randomised controlled trials</td>
<td>❯ insoles, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Appropriate intervention/control</td>
<td>❯ Any means of transportation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ arms</td>
<td>❯ (bicycles, motor driven, skies,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Conducted in humans</td>
<td>❯ equestrian, etc)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Reported in English</td>
<td>❯ Inadequate follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>❯ Peer-reviewed publications</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Two reviewers (JBL and DMB) independently assessed the eli-
gibility criteria with subsequent consensus by discussion. If
unanimous consensus could not be reached, this was arbitrated
by a third person (LBA).
In total, 25 studies were included.26–50

Data extraction
All included studies were assessed using the domain-based evaluation
tool recommended by the Cochrane collaboration.51 Two
reviewers (JBL and DMB) independently collected the support
for judgement and final judgements required consensus from all
authors of this paper. If reporting was incomplete or unclear,
efforts were made to contact the corresponding authors and ask
by ‘open questions’ in order to reduce the risk of overly positive
answers. Weighting of studies by quality assessment was consid-
ered but not performed, as such appraisals would inevitably involve subjective decisions and no evidence in support of this
approach exists.51
Data extraction for total estimate and exposure subgroup esti-
mates covered the primary outcome, defined by each study. Injuries
were classified as acute or overuse according to definitions
used by each study and proprioception was defined as exercises aiming at improving joint proprioception and/or joint
stability. For the outcome subgroups, acute and overuse injuries,
we additionally extracted appropriate secondary data from
studies where information was available in order to optimise the
power of these analyses. Overlapping entities were omitted so
no injury was analysed more than once.
The stratification of studies into less heterogeneous exposure
subgroups was, with the exception of Beijsterveldt et al.27 per-
formed after completion of the literature search. Beijsterveldt
et al. was added from the updated literature search and was
unambiguously fitted into the multiple exposures group.
As compliance plays a central role in the robustness of results,
sensitivity analyses without studies that neglected to analyse by
intention-treat were conducted.
During the iterative process of hypothesis generation and pre-
liminary searches the prespecified eligibility criteria were elabo-
rated but not changed. All a priori-specified analyses were
performed as planned.

Statistics
Whenever possible, only first-time injuries were taken into
account as repeated outcomes are likely to be dependent of each
other and therefore would introduce bias. Most studies have
analysed by calculation of either RR, injury rate RR or Cox
regression RR. When no appropriate effect estimates were
reported or studies neglected to adjust for clustering effects,
we adjusted for clustering effects and calculated a RR. Twelve
included studies were not originally adjusted for cluster random-
isation. As individuals in clusters potentially lack independence
of each other, a regulation of sample size calculations is often
required. The equation for cluster adjustment is

$$\text{IF} = 1 + (n-1)p$$

where p is the intracluster correlation coefficient, n the average
cluster size and IF the inflation factor. Effective sample size is
calculated by dividing sample size with IF.52 The intracluster
correlation coefficient was calculated by

$$\rho = s^2_c / (s^2_c + s^2_o)$$

where $s^2_c$ is the within cluster variance of observations taken
from individuals in the same cluster and $s^2_o$ the variance of true
cluster means.53 In the nine studies where the corresponding
authors did not provide us with sufficient data for p calculation,
we achieved this by calculating an average intracluster correlation
coefficient based on p values from studies, which were
appropriately adjusted for clustering effects.
In order to address reporting bias formally, we sought to test
all analyses by the Harbord small-study effect test with a modified
Galbraith plot.54 This follows the recommendations by the
Cochrane handbook for systematic reviews of interventions and
is available in STATA V. No effective sample sizes for inter-
vention and control group populations were used for the required
binary data input to achieve a cluster-adjusted result for this test.
The heterogeneity for all analyses was assessed by $I^2$ and the
$\chi^2$ (Q) p value. $I^2$ is calculated from the Stata given Q value
and number of studies (n) by

$$I^2 = \frac{Q-(n-1)}{Q}$$

A rough interpretation guide of $I^2$ has been proposed by
Higgins et al.51
All analyses were computed in STATA V.12 by user-written
commands described by Egger et al.56 The random effects model
was used for the weighting of studies. Statistically heterogeneous
estimates were graphically explored by the `metainf` command, displaying the influence of each individual study on the effect estimate. These analyses did not reveal conclusive information of particular studies primarily causing the heterogeneity and will not be reported throughout this article.

RESULTS
Study characteristics
Table 1 summarises the characteristics of 25 included studies. A full study characteristics table is available in the online supplementary eTable 2. In total 26 610 individuals were included in the study. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of 25 included studies. A full study characteristics table is available in the online supplementary eTable 2. In total 26 610 individuals were included in the study.

We contacted nine authors and four supplied clarifying answers with subsequent change in their data or quality assessment. For detailed quality assessments and quality assessment summary see online supplementary eMethods 4, eTable 1 and eFigure 2.

Total estimate
The total effect estimate was RR 0.632 (95% CI 0.533 to 0.750, I²=70% with a χ² p<0.001). Brusho et al.,35 Eils et al.,39 Gilchrist et al.,40 Holmich et al.,41 and Soderman et al.,46 did not report intention-to-treat data. When performing a sensitivity analysis on the 20 studies with intention-to-treat data, an estimate of RR 0.608 (0.503–0.736, I²=74%, χ² p<0.001) was found. A post hoc analysis stratified for age showed RR 0.577 (0.453–0.736, I²=68%, χ² p<0.001) for adolescents and RR 0.683 (0.526–0.885, I²=72%, p<0.001) for adults (figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>Intervention</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Completion</th>
<th>Follow-up</th>
<th>Injuries</th>
<th>Primary out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Askling et al.,36</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Soccer, male, elite</td>
<td>Intervention 15 Control 15</td>
<td>10 weeks + 1 season</td>
<td>Intervention 3 Control 10</td>
<td>Hamstring injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beijerdeldt et al.,37</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Soccer, 18–40, male amateur</td>
<td>Intervention 223 Control 233</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>Intervention 135 Control 139</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brusho et al.,38</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Conscripts, 19–26 years</td>
<td>Intervention 487 Control 490</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 50 Control 48</td>
<td>Overuse knee injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coppack et al.,39</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Recruits, 17–30 years</td>
<td>Intervention 759 Control 743</td>
<td>14 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 10 Control 36</td>
<td>Overuse ant. knee pain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eils et al.,40</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td>Basketball, 1st–7th league</td>
<td>Intervention 81 Control 91</td>
<td>1 season</td>
<td>Intervention 7 Control 21</td>
<td>Ankle injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emery et al.,41</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td>Students, 14–19 years</td>
<td>Intervention 60 Control 54</td>
<td>6 weeks + 6 months</td>
<td>Intervention 2 Control 10</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emery and Meeuwsse,42</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Soccer, 13–18 years</td>
<td>Intervention 380 Control 364</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Intervention 50 Control 79</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emery et al.,43</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td>Basketball, 12–18 years</td>
<td>Intervention 494 Control 426</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Intervention 130 Control 141</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilchrist et al.,44</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Soccer, collegiate H. school, female, soccer</td>
<td>Intervention 583 Control 852</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 2 Control 10</td>
<td>Non-contact ACL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heidt et al.,45</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td></td>
<td>Intervention 42 Control 258</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>Intervention 6 Control 87</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmich et al.,46</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Football, 2nd–5th level</td>
<td>Intervention 477 Control 430</td>
<td>42 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 23 Control 30</td>
<td>Groin injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jamtvedt et al.,47</td>
<td>Stretch</td>
<td>Internet, &gt;18 years</td>
<td>Intervention 1079 Control 1046</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 339 Control 348</td>
<td>Lower limb + trunk injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaBella et al.,48</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Athletes, female</td>
<td>Intervention 737 Control 755</td>
<td>1 season</td>
<td>Intervention 50 Control 96</td>
<td>Lower extremity injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Longo et al.,49</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Basketball, male</td>
<td>Intervention 80 Control 41</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>Intervention 14 Control 17</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McGuine and Keene,50</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td>Basketball, adolescent</td>
<td>Intervention 373 Control 392</td>
<td>4 weeks + 4 season</td>
<td>Intervention 23 Control 39</td>
<td>Ankle sprain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olsen et al.,51</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Handball, 15–17 years</td>
<td>Intervention 958 Control 879</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>Intervention 48 Control 81</td>
<td>Knee and ankle injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasanen et al.,52</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Floorball, female, elite</td>
<td>Intervention 256 Control 201</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>Intervention 20 Control 52</td>
<td>Non-contact injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petersen et al.,53</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Soccer, male, elite</td>
<td>Intervention 461 Control 481</td>
<td>12 months</td>
<td>Intervention 12 Control 32</td>
<td>Hamstring injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pope et al.,54</td>
<td>Stretch</td>
<td>Recruits, 17–35 years</td>
<td>Intervention 549 Control 544</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 23 Control 25</td>
<td>4 specific LE injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pope et al.,2005</td>
<td>Stretch</td>
<td>Recruits, male</td>
<td>Intervention 666 Control 702</td>
<td>12 weeks</td>
<td>Intervention 158 Control 175</td>
<td>Lower limb injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soderman et al.,56</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td>Soccer, female, elite</td>
<td>Intervention 62 Control 78</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Intervention 28 Control 31</td>
<td>Lower extremity injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soligard et al.,57</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Football, 13–17, female</td>
<td>Intervention 1055 Control 837</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>Intervention 121 Control 143</td>
<td>Lower extremity injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steffen et al.,58</td>
<td>Multi</td>
<td>Soccer, female</td>
<td>Intervention 1073 Control 947</td>
<td>8 weeks + 1 season</td>
<td>Intervention 242 Control 241</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walden et al.,59</td>
<td>Strength</td>
<td>Soccer, 12–17, female</td>
<td>Intervention 2479 Control 2085</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Intervention 7 Control 14</td>
<td>ACL injuries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wedderkopp et al.,60</td>
<td>Proprioception</td>
<td>Handball, 16–18, female</td>
<td>Intervention 111 Control 126</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>Intervention 11 Control 45</td>
<td>All injuries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Stratified exposure analyses

The strength training estimate including four studies was RR 0.315 (0.207–0.480, I²=0%, χ² p=0.808). All studies in the strength training group were analysed by intention-to-treat. For stratified exposure Forest plots see online supplementary eFigure 4–7.

The pooled effect estimate for six studies with proprioception training as the primary exposure showed a RR of 0.550 (0.347–0.869, I²=66%, χ² p=0.012). Sensitivity analysis of intention-to-treat ruled out Eils et al and Soderman et al and revealed RR 0.480 (0.268–0.862, I²=71%, χ² p=0.017).

Unlike the above two exposures, the overall estimate for stretching did not prove significant with RR 0.963 (0.846–1.095, I²=0%, χ² p=0.975) based on three studies. All studies in the stretching group were analysed by intention-to-treat.

The combined effect estimate for the 12 studies with multiple exposure interventions revealed a RR of 0.655 (0.520–0.826, I²=69%, χ² p<0.001). Sensitivity analysis of intention-to-treat excluded Brushoj et al and Gilchrist et al and Holmich et al and revealed RR 0.625 (0.477–0.820, I²=75%, χ² p<0.001; figure 2).

Stratified outcome analyses

On the basis of primary or secondary data from nine studies, the RR for all types of exposures against acute injury was 0.647 (0.502–0.836, I²=73%, χ² p<0.001). One study had strength training as exposure, two studies did proprioception training and the remaining six studies were from the group of multiple exposure studies. Sensitivity analysis of eight intention-to-treat analysed studies (Soderman et al was excluded) showed a RR 0.615 (0.470–0.803, I²=75%, χ² p<0.001).
Six studies provided data on overuse injuries. RR from these six studies was 0.527 (0.373–0.746, \(I^2=19\%\), \(\chi^2\ p=0.287\)). All studies in this analysis, except one proprioception training study, were multiple exposure studies. All analysed studies reported intention-to-treat data (figure 3A,B).

Small-study effect
The Harbord test for the total estimate of all 25 studies showed a highly significant small-study effect test. Exposure and outcome subgroups revealed significant test for only the multiple exposures group. See online supplementary eFigure 7 for modified-Galbraith plot and online supplementary eTable 3 for Harbord tests.

DISCUSSION
An overall RR estimate for physical activity for injury prevention, adjusted for clustering effects, was 0.632 (0.532–0.750), and slightly lower when sensitivity analysed by intention-to-treat (RR 0.607 (0.501–0.735)). A preventive effect of this size should be considered convincing, but the analysis was heterogeneous and the result is, therefore, clinically useless. However, it also suggests that some types of interventions may prove better than others.

Stretching did not show any protective effect (RR=0.961 (0.836–1.106)), while strength training proved highly significant (RR 0.315 (0.207–0.480)). Results from stretching and strength training studies were not heterogeneous despite different programmes were used and outcomes of interest were different. This points towards a strong generalisability of results. Proprioception training and multiple exposure programmes were also effective (RR=0.480 (0.266–0.864) and 0.625 (0.477–0.820), respectively), but results were relatively heterogeneous.

The effect estimate of stretching and proprioception training analyses in this article corresponds to earlier reviews. Our data do not support the use of stretching for injury prevention purposes, neither before or after exercise, however it...
should be noted that this analysis only included two studies on army recruits and one internet-based study on the general population. Strength training showed a trend towards better preventive effect than proprioception training and proved significantly better than multiple exposure studies, even though all multiple exposure studies included a strength training component. Further research of strength training for a wider range of injuries is still needed, as our analyses suggest great sports injury prevention potential for this type of intervention. With a growing number of randomised controlled trials containing numerous exposure types, it was of interest to assess intervention studies with multiple exposures separately, although, as expected, still being a heterogeneous subgroup. Though it makes intuitive sense to design an array of exposures for prevention of all injuries, it is important to note that each component may be reduced quantitatively and/or qualitatively by doing so. Multiple exposure programmes may therefore reduce the proportion of proven beneficial exposures and consequently reduce the overall preventive effect on sports injury. Additionally, the risk of designing too extensive prevention programmes will unavoidably be enhanced with growing amounts of applied exposures and compliance may suffer as a consequence. Although most multiple intervention studies in this analysis were well designed and carried out in a satisfactory way, this subgroup did not exhibit an unambiguous preventive effect on sports injuries. Our findings suggest that designs of multiple exposure interventions should at least be built from well-proven single exposures and that further research into single exposures remains pivotal. When analyses were stratified by outcome, both acute (RR 0.615 (0.470–0.803)) and overuse (RR 0.527 (0.373–0.746)) injuries were effectively reduced by preventive physical activity, although overuse injuries fared slightly better. Five of six studies analysing overuse injuries were multiple exposure studies, and estimates were not particularly heterogeneous. Six of nine studies analysing acute injuries were multiple exposure studies with heterogeneous effect sizes. It is not possible to derive which parts of these interventions manifested the preventive effect. Future studies should report acute and overuse injuries separately and test specific exposures against these in order to acquire further knowledge in this import area.

Strengths and limitations

The aim of this meta-analysis was to aggregate a wide array of populations, exposures and outcomes to augment the external validity while maintaining the suitability of combining studies. Physical activity is broadly defined and populations include army recruits, recreational and professional athletes. In this regard, it should be pointed out that the diversity of included studies should not be interchanged with the I² measure of statistical heterogeneity, which exclusively concerns inconsistency in effect sizes. The statistically homogeneous analyses of strength training and stretching studies differing in population, intervention, and outcome, prove the generalisability of results. The statistically heterogeneous analyses of this meta-analysis should be interpreted with caution as this heterogeneity could arise from true variation (diversity in design) and/or artefactual variation (bias by conduct, attrition, etc.).

Omission of intention-to-treat analysis and cluster adjustment are two sources of potentially serious bias. As compliance to intervention programmes appears to vary and remains a disputed phenomenon, the analysis by intention-to-treat plays a central role in the robustness of results. In the present meta-analysis we extracted data from intention-to-treat analyses whenever possible and performed sensitivity analysis by exclusion of five studies with no report of intention-to-treat analysis. Contrary to the expected more conservative effect estimate, the intention-to-treat sensitivity analyses revealed even more beneficial effect estimates. As a result we can conclude that physical activity as primary prevention against sports injuries is effective, even if it has been argued that compliance issues could diminish the implementation and effect of these programmes. We speculate the above to result from an association between using intention-to-treat analysis and study conduct in general. For example, Brushøj et al. added concurrent training in the critical high risk period of military training initiation, which intuitively appears detrimental to overuse injuries. Soderman et al. exhibited several methodological issues and reported adverse effects of major injuries that have not been reproduced by other studies. None of them analysed by intention-to-treat and exclusion of such studies improved the quality of included studies and subsequently the effect estimate.

Cluster adjustment is similarly important in order not to overestimate the power of the study. A strength of this meta-analysis is the adjustment of these studies that report the same effect estimate but underestimate the width of CIs. Corresponding authors of studies without cluster adjustment were contacted and three provided data for p calculation. For the remaining nine studies we calculated an average p value extracted from 12 reported values of 10 studies that performed correct adjustment methods. This caused, in some cases, a dramatic, down-regulation of effective sample size which affected the study weight in the quantitative analyses.

A short discussion of the allocation concealment and participant blinding quality assessments is advocated. As true participant blinding is frequently argued to be impossible in sports injury prevention and allocation, concealment makes less sense in non-pharmacological interventions, these quality assessment items should be interpreted with caution. In spite of this, some of the included studies made qualified efforts to alleviate these, which, in this review, resulted in a lower risk of bias judgement. The domain-based tool was chosen as evaluation tool of this review as recommended by the Cochrane collaboration with the most convincing validation evidence in this area. Although not being perfectly suited for assessment of sports injury prevention studies, assessment of these parameters still holds relevance as these factors can greatly influence analyses.

A Harbord’s small-study effect test and a modified Galbraith’s plot were performed for this meta-analysis to assess publication bias. The small-study effect test for the total estimate was highly significant, while the multiple exposures subgroup was the only subgroup showing a statistically significant test. According to Egger et al., significant small-study effects may arise from a number of reasons, including true publication bias, heterogeneity, chance, and methodological differences between smaller and larger studies. As the p value of the small-study effects increased when the total estimate test was divided into less heterogeneous subgroups, it is likely that a substantial part of the total estimate small-study effect originates in heterogeneity. Owing to the relatively heavy burden of implementing physical activity interventions, it should be noted that smaller studies often would be able to pay greater attention to the intervention for each team/individual, thereby enabling them to obtain more thorough intervention quality. Hence, a methodological difference may exist as well.

CONCLUSION

In general, physical activity was shown to effectively reduce sports injuries. Stretching proved no beneficial effect, whereas...
multiple exposure programmes, proprioception training, and strength training, in that order, showed a tendency towards increasing effect. Strength training reduced sports injuries to less than one-third. We advocate that multiple exposure interventions should be constructed on the basis of well-proven single exposures and that further research into single exposures, particularly strength training, remains crucial. Both acute and overuse injuries could be significantly reduced, overuse injuries by almost a half. Apart from a few outlying studies, consistently favourable estimates were obtained for all injury prevention measures except for stretching.

What this study adds

This meta-analysis provides quantitative effect estimates of different exercise programmes on sports injury prevention. Comparison of exposures reveals a highly effective strength training estimate, significantly better than multicomponent studies.

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Contributors

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