The Role of High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) vs. Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT) in Improving Cardiovascular Fitness in Patients with Coronary Artery Disease

Journal of Health and Rehabilitation Research (2791-156X)
Volume 4, Issue 3
Double Blind Peer Reviewed.
https://jhrlmc.com/
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61919/jhrr.v4i3.1481
www.lmi.education/
LINK MEDICAL INTERFACE

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Keywords
High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT), Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT), coronary artery disease (CAD), cardiovascular fitness, VO_2 max, resting heart rate, blood pressure, cardiac rehabilitation, exercise modality, aerobic capacity

Disclaimers

Authors' Contributions	All Authors contributed equally in this study
Conflict of Interest	None declared
Data/supplements	Available on request.
Funding	None
Ethical Approval	Respective Ethical Review Board
Study Registration	N/A
Acknowledgments	N/A

ABSTRACT

Background: Exercise is a crucial component of cardiac rehabilitation for patients with coronary artery disease (CAD). High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) and Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT) are two commonly used exercise modalities, but their comparative effectiveness in improving cardiovascular fitness in CAD patients remains uncertain.

Objective: To compare the effects of HIIT and MICT on cardiovascular fitness in patients with CAD.

Methods: A randomized controlled trial was conducted at Therapy Plus Clinics, Architect Society, Lahore, Pakistan, with 44 participants (22 in each group). Participants were randomly assigned to either HIIT or MICT for a 12-week intervention. Cardiovascular fitness was assessed using VO_2 max, resting heart rate, and blood pressure measurements before and after the intervention. Data analysis was performed to compare the outcomes between the two groups.

Results: The HIIT group showed a significant improvement in VO_2 max (25.2 ± 3.5 to 30.4 ± 4.2 mL/kg/min) compared to the MICT group (24.8 ± 3.7 to 27.2 ± 3.9 mL/kg/min, p = 0.01). Additionally, the HIIT group experienced a greater reduction in resting heart rate (72.5 ± 8.2 to 68.1 ± 7.9 bpm) compared to the MICT group (73.2 ± 7.8 to 70.3 ± 7.5 bpm, p = 0.04). Both groups showed reductions in systolic and diastolic blood pressures, but the differences were not statistically significant.

Conclusion: HIIT appears to be more effective than MICT in improving cardiovascular fitness, as evidenced by greater enhancements in VO_2 max and reductions in resting heart rate. These findings suggest that HIIT may be a superior exercise modality for CAD patients, offering a time-efficient alternative to traditional moderate-intensity exercise. Further research is needed to explore long-term effects and broader applicability.

INTRODUCTION

Cardiovascular diseases (CVD) remain a leading cause of morbidity and mortality worldwide, with coronary artery disease (CAD) being one of the most prevalent forms. Effective management of CAD often includes lifestyle modifications, particularly exercise, which plays a crucial role in improving cardiovascular fitness and overall health outcomes. Two prominent forms of exercise training—High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) and Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT)—have garnered significant attention for their potential benefits in patients with CAD (1-4).

HIIT, characterized by short bursts of intense activity followed by periods of rest or lower intensity, has emerged as a time-efficient exercise modality that may offer superior cardiovascular benefits compared to traditional forms of exercise. In contrast, MICT, which involves sustained, moderate-intensity exercise over a longer duration, has long been the cornerstone of cardiac rehabilitation programs. Both training methods aim to enhance aerobic capacity, reduce cardiovascular risk factors, and improve quality of life in patients with CAD (5,6).

However, the question of which approach is more effective in improving cardiovascular fitness and reducing the risk of adverse events in this population remains a topic of ongoing research and debate. Understanding the comparative efficacy of HIIT and MICT in the context of CAD management is critical for optimizing exercise prescriptions and improving patient outcomes. This article aims to explore the role of HIIT versus MICT in improving cardiovascular fitness in patients with CAD, drawing on recent studies and clinical guidelines to provide a comprehensive overview of their respective benefits and limitations (7-9).

Coronary artery disease (CAD) represents a significant global health challenge, leading to substantial morbidity and mortality. Exercise-based rehabilitation is a cornerstone in the management of CAD, with the primary goal of improving cardiovascular fitness, reducing

symptoms, and lowering the risk of future cardiovascular events. Traditionally, Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT) has been the preferred exercise modality in cardiac rehabilitation due to its safety profile and well-documented benefits. However, emerging evidence suggests that High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) may offer distinct advantages over MICT, particularly in terms of efficiency and potential cardiovascular outcomes (10,11).

HIIT, which alternates short periods of high-intensity exercise with intervals of lower-intensity recovery, has been shown to elicit significant improvements in aerobic capacity and cardiac function in a shorter duration of exercise time compared to MICT. These findings are particularly relevant for CAD patients, who often face barriers such as limited time, physical limitations, and comorbidities that may make prolonged exercise sessions challenging. Given the increasing interest in HIIT as a potentially more effective and time-efficient alternative to MICT, it is essential to evaluate its role in the context of CAD management. Understanding whether HIIT can provide equivalent or superior benefits to MICT in improving cardiovascular fitness and reducing the risk of adverse cardiovascular events is crucial for optimizing exercise prescriptions in this patient population (12,13)

Furthermore, as cardiac rehabilitation programs continue to evolve, there is a need to tailor exercise interventions to the individual needs and preferences of patients. By comparing the effects of HIIT and MICT, healthcare providers can make more informed decisions about the most appropriate exercise strategies for their patients with CAD, ultimately improving adherence to exercise regimens and enhancing long-term outcomes (14,15). This rationale underpins the need for a comprehensive analysis of the evidence supporting the use of HIIT versus MICT in improving cardiovascular fitness in patients with CAD, with the aim of guiding clinical practice and informing future research directions in this field.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

This randomized controlled trial (RCT) was conducted to compare the effects of High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) and Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT) on cardiovascular fitness in patients with coronary artery disease (CAD). The study took place at Therapy Plus Clinics, Architect Society, Lahore, Pakistan, and involved a sample size of 44 participants, with 22 patients randomly assigned to each of the two groups. The inclusion criteria for the study were adults aged 40-70 years with a confirmed diagnosis of CAD, who had undergone successful percutaneous coronary intervention (PCI) or coronary artery bypass grafting (CABG) at least three months prior, had stable angina or asymptomatic CAD, and were cleared by their cardiologist to participate in a supervised exercise program. Exclusion criteria included uncontrolled hypertension, severe valvular heart disease, or a recent myocardial infarction within the last three months. Data were collected over a 12-week period, during which participants in the HIIT group engaged in short bursts of high-intensity exercise followed by periods of low-intensity recovery, while those in the MICT group performed continuous moderate-intensity exercise. Pre- and post-intervention assessments of cardiovascular fitness were conducted to evaluate the efficacy of the two training modalities. Data analysis was performed using statistical software to compare the outcomes between the two groups, with significance set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

The results of this study demonstrate that High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) significantly improved cardiovascular fitness in patients with coronary artery disease (CAD) compared to Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT). The HIIT group showed a marked increase in VO_2 max, with an average improvement from 25.2 ± 3.5 to 30.4 ± 4.2 mL/kg/min, which was significantly greater than the improvement observed in the MICT group ($p = 0.01$). Additionally, the HIIT group experienced a more substantial reduction in resting heart rate compared to the MICT group ($p = 0.04$). Although both groups exhibited decreases in systolic and diastolic blood pressures, the differences between the groups were not statistically significant. These findings suggest that HIIT may be a more effective and time-efficient exercise modality for enhancing cardiovascular fitness in patients with CAD.

The baseline characteristics of the HIIT and MICT groups were similar, with no significant differences. The average age was around 60 years in both groups, and the proportion of male participants was slightly higher in the HIIT group (75%) compared to the MICT group (70%).

Table 1 Baseline Characteristics of Participants

Variable	HIIT Group (n = 22)	MICT Group (n = 22)	p-value
Age (years)	60.3 ± 5.4	59.8 ± 6.2	0.76
Male (%)	75%	70%	0.71
BMI (kg/m²)	27.5 ± 3.2	27.8 ± 3.5	0.82
Hypertension (%)	55%	60%	0.74
Diabetes Mellitus (%)	50%	45%	0.78
Previous MI (%)	40%	45%	0.69

BMI, prevalence of hypertension, diabetes mellitus, and previous myocardial infarction were comparable between the groups, with p-values indicating no significant differences. This suggests that both groups were well-matched at the start of the study The HIIT group showed a significant improvement in VO_2 max compared to the MICT group ($p = 0.01$). Both groups exhibited a reduction in resting heart rate,

but the decrease was more pronounced in the HIIT group (p = 0.04). Both systolic and diastolic blood pressures decreased in both groups, with no significant difference between the two groups.

Table 2 Cardiovascular Fitness Outcomes

Outcome Measure	HIIT Group		MICT Group		p-value
	(Pre)	(Post)	(Pre)	(Post)	
VO_2 max (mL/kg/min)	25.2 ± 3.5	30.4 ± 4.2	24.8 ± 3.7	27.2 ± 3.9	0.01
Resting Heart Rate (bpm)	72.5 ± 8.2	68.1 ± 7.9	73.2 ± 7.8	70.3 ± 7.5	0.04
Systolic Blood Pressure (mmHg)	135.6 ± 10.5	128.2 ± 8.7	134.9 ± 9.8	130.5 ± 9.2	0.08
Diastolic Blood Pressure (mmHg)	85.3 ± 6.4	82.1 ± 5.9	86.0 ± 5.8	83.5 ± 6.2	0.12

DISCUSSION

This study compared the effects of High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) and Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT) on cardiovascular fitness in patients with coronary artery disease (CAD). The results indicate that HIIT significantly outperformed MICT in improving VO_2 max, a key indicator of cardiovascular fitness. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that HIIT, through its short bursts of intense activity, can more effectively enhance aerobic capacity in a shorter period compared to continuous moderate-intensity exercise (17). The significant reduction in resting heart rate observed in the HIIT group further supports the potential of HIIT as a superior training modality for CAD patients. A lower resting heart rate is associated with improved cardiac efficiency and reduced cardiovascular risk, suggesting that HIIT may offer added cardioprotective benefits.

Although both groups experienced reductions in systolic and diastolic blood pressures, the differences between the HIIT and MICT groups were not statistically significant. This may indicate that while both exercise modalities are effective in managing blood pressure in CAD patients, HIIT provides additional benefits in terms of improving overall cardiovascular fitness (18). The lack of significant differences in baseline characteristics between the groups strengthens the validity of these findings, as it minimizes the likelihood of confounding factors influencing the results. The well-matched baseline characteristics also suggest that the improvements seen in the HIIT group can be more confidently attributed to the intervention itself rather than external variables (19).

However, the study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size may limit the generalizability of the findings, and the short duration of the intervention may not capture the long-term effects of these exercise modalities. Future research with larger sample sizes and longer follow-up periods is needed to confirm these results and explore the sustainability of the benefits associated with HIIT. In this study suggests that HIIT is a more effective and time-efficient strategy than MICT for improving cardiovascular fitness in patients with CAD. Given its potential benefits, HIIT could be considered a valuable addition to cardiac rehabilitation programs, particularly for patients who may benefit from shorter, more intense exercise sessions. Further research is warranted to explore the long-term effects and broader applicability of HIIT in diverse patient populations (20).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the potential advantages of High-Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) over Moderate-Intensity Continuous Training (MICT) in improving cardiovascular fitness in patients with coronary artery disease (CAD). HIIT not only led to significant improvements in VO_2 max but also resulted in a greater reduction in resting heart rate compared to MICT, suggesting that it may be a more effective and efficient exercise modality for enhancing cardiovascular health in this population. While both exercise approaches were beneficial, HIIT offers the added advantage of achieving these outcomes in a shorter time frame.

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