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[Intervention Review]

Low level laser therapy (Classes I, II and III) for treating rheumatoid arthritis

Lucie Brosseau¹, Vivian Welch², George A Wells³, Rob de Bie⁴, Arne Gam⁵, Katherine Harman⁶, Michelle Morin⁷, Beverley Shea⁸, Peter Tugwell⁹

¹School of Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. ²Centre for Global Health, Institute of Population Health, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. ³Cardiovascular Research Reference Centre, University of Ottawa Heart Institute, Ottawa, Canada. ⁴Department of Epidemiology, Maastricht University, Maastricht, Netherlands. ⁵Vanlose, Denmark. ⁶Psychology, Neuroscience, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada. ⁷School of Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. ⁸Institute of Population Health, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. ⁹Centre for Global Health, Institute of Population Health, Department of Medicine, Ottawa Hospital, Ottawa, Canada

Contact address: Lucie Brosseau, School of Rehabilitation Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Ottawa, 451 Smyth Road, Ottawa, Ontario, K1H 8M5, Canada. Lucie.Brosseau@uottawa.ca.

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ABSTRACT

Background

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) affects a large proportion of the population. Low Level Laser Therapy (LLLT) was introduced as an alternative non-invasive treatment for RA about ten years ago. LLLT is a light source that generates extremely pure light, of a single wavelength. The effect is not thermal, but rather related to photochemical reactions in the cells. The effectiveness of LLLT for rheumatoid arthritis is still controversial. This review is an update of the original review published in October 1998.

Objectives

To assess the effectiveness of LLLT in the treatment of RA.

Search methods

We initially searched MEDLINE, EMBASE (from 1998), the registries of the Cochrane Musculoskeletal Group and the field of Rehabilitation and Related Therapies as well as the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL) up to June 2001. This search has now been updated to include articles published up to June 2005.

Selection criteria

Following an a priori protocol, only randomized controlled trials of LLLT for the treatment of patients with a clinical diagnosis of RA were eligible. Abstracts were excluded unless further data could be obtained from the authors.

Data collection and analysis

Two reviewers independently selected trials for inclusion, then extracted data and assessed quality using predetermined forms. Heterogeneity was tested using chi-squared. A fixed effects model was used throughout for continuous variables, except where heterogeneity existed, in which case, a random effects model was used. Results were analyzed as weighted mean differences (WMD) with 95% confidence intervals (CI), where the difference between the treated and control groups was weighted by the inverse of the variance. Dichotomous outcomes were analyzed with relative risks.

Main results

A total of 222 patients were included in the five placebo-controlled trials, with 130 randomized to laser therapy. Relative to a separate control group, LLLT reduced pain by 1.10 points (95% CI: 1.82, 0.39) on visual analogue scale relative to placebo, reduced morning stiffness duration by 27.5 minutes (95%CI: 2.9 to 52 minutes) and increased tip to palm flexibility by 1.3 cm (95% CI: 0.8 to 1.7). Other outcomes such as functional assessment, range of motion and local swelling did not differ between groups. There were no significant differences between subgroups based on LLLT dosage, wavelength, site of application or treatment length. For RA, relative to a control group using the opposite hand, there was no difference observed between the control and treatment hand for morning stiffness duration, and also no significant improvement in pain relief RR 13.00 (95% CI: 0.79 to 214.06). However, only one study was included as using the contralateral limb as control. .

Authors' conclusions

LLLT could be considered for short-term treatment for relief of pain and morning stiffness for RA patients, particularly since it has few side-effects. Clinicians and researchers should consistently report the characteristics of the LLLT device and the application techniques used. New trials on LLLT should make use of standardized, validated outcomes. Despite some positive findings, this meta-analysis lacked data on how LLLT effectiveness is affected by four important factors: wavelength, treatment duration of LLLT, dosage and site of application over nerves instead of joints. There is clearly a need to investigate the effects of these factors on LLLT effectiveness for RA in randomized controlled clinical trials.

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

Low level laser therapy for rheumatoid arthritis

Does low level laser therapy work for treating rheumatoid arthritis?

Six studies of medium quality were reviewed and provide the best evidence we have today. Collectively, these studies tested over 220 people with rheumatoid arthritis. The studies compared how well people did while receiving either laser therapy or a 'placebo' (fake) laser therapy. Laser therapy was given mostly on the hands and generally for two to three times a week for four weeks. There were also many different wavelengths and dosages given.

What is rheumatoid arthritis and low level laser therapy?

Rheumatoid arthritis (RA) is a disease in which the body's immune system attacks its own healthy tissues. The attack happens mostly in the joints of the hands and feet and causes redness, pain, swelling and heat around the joints. Drug and non-drug treatments are used to relieve pain and/or swelling. Low level laser therapy, is a non-drug treatment used to decrease swelling and pain. Without producing heat, the laser emits very pure light that causes light and chemical reactions in cells where it is targeted.

What did the studies show?

Studies showed that laser therapy decreased pain and morning stiffness more than 'placebo' laser therapy. Laser therapy also increased hand flexibility more than placebo therapy.

Pain decreased by 1.10 points on a scale of 1-10. The length of time for morning stiffness decreased by 28 minutes.

Studies also showed that laser therapy worked just as well as 'placebo' laser therapy to improve range of motion, function, swelling and grip strength.

Only two of the studies measured the effect of laser therapy three months after the end of treatment. The results from these studies indicated that laser therapy worked just as well as 'placebo' therapy after three months times.

Dose, length of laser administration time and wavelength of the laser therapies did not appear to make a significant difference, though there was some evidence indicating that longer administration times and shorter wavelengths produced better effects.

Were there any side effects?

No side effects were reported in the studies.

What is the bottom line?

There is 'silver' level evidence that low level laser therapy in people with rheumatoid arthritis for up to four weeks does decrease pain and morning stiffness. It does not appear, however, to have long-lasting effects.

Most of the studies tested laser therapy on the hand, so it is not clear whether laser therapy would affect other joints of the body the same way.