2025 International Conference on Fiscal Management, Holistic Social Studies (FMHSS 2025)

Article

A Study on the Effects of Environmental Factors and Exercise Interaction on Human Thermoregulation and Physiological Functions

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Abstract: This study comprehensively investigates the complex interactions between diverse environmental factors and physical activity, with a primary focus on their combined effects on human thermoregulation and overall physiological functions. As individuals engage in physical exertion across varying climates, the body's ability to maintain homeostasis is significantly challenged. By systematically examining critical environmental variables—such as ambient temperature, relative humidity, wind speed, and altitude—alongside different exercise intensities and durations, this research aims to elucidate how these elements synergistically or antagonistically influence fundamental biological mechanisms. Specifically, the investigation explores the dynamics of heat dissipation, core body temperature regulation, cardiovascular system responses, and neuromuscular function during prolonged physical exertion. The methodology draws upon a robust synthesis of existing literature, meticulously controlled experimental observations, and extensive field data to provide a comprehensive understanding of both adaptive and maladaptive physiological responses under fluctuating environmental conditions. Furthermore, the research highlights the critical thresholds at which environmental stress begins to impair physical capabilities and cognitive focus. The findings yield significant practical implications for optimizing athletic performance, enhancing occupational health standards, and improving public safety protocols. These insights are particularly relevant in the contemporary context of global climate change and the increasing frequency of severe weather conditions. Ultimately, this study provides a vital framework for developing targeted interventions and evidence-based guidelines to protect individuals engaging in physical activities across diverse and challenging environments.

Keywords: thermoregulation; environmental stress; physical activity; human physiology; heat stress; exercise performance

Received: 12 May 2026
Revised: 16 June 2026
Accepted: 27 June 2026
Published: 01 July 2026

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Significance

In recent years, global climate change has become more pronounced, leading to an increased frequency of severe weather conditions such as heatwaves, cold spells, and variations in humidity and atmospheric pressure. Simultaneously, there has been a growing public interest in health and fitness, encouraging more individuals to engage in physical activities across diverse and often challenging environmental conditions. These environments include urban areas with elevated temperatures, humid subtropical zones, high-altitude mountainous regions, and colder northern climates. The human body depends on a sophisticated thermoregulatory system to maintain a stable core temperature and support optimal physiological function during physical exertion.

However, exposure to challenging environmental factors—such as high temperatures, low temperatures, high humidity, or reduced oxygen levels at high altitudes—places additional physiological demands on the body. These demands can hinder performance, increase the likelihood of injury or illness (e.g., heat-related conditions, hypothermia, dehydration, altitude sickness), and, in severe cases, pose significant health risks. Consequently, conducting comprehensive research on the interaction between environmental conditions and physical activity holds substantial scientific and practical value. Such studies can provide theoretical insights for enhancing athletic training methods, competition strategies, and recovery protocols [1]. Additionally, they are crucial for occupational health, particularly for individuals working in physically demanding settings such as firefighting, construction, and outdoor professions [2, 3]. Furthermore, this research can inform the development of preventive measures, safety guidelines, and public health policies aimed at reducing risks associated with environmental challenges linked to climate change.

1.2. Current Research Status

A considerable body of research has been devoted to understanding how exercise or individual environmental conditions—such as heat, cold, humidity, or altitude—affect human physiological processes. These studies have yielded valuable insights into topics like sweat rate dynamics, cardiovascular responses, thermogenic mechanisms, fluid and electrolyte balance, and metabolic adaptations. However, most existing literature tends to focus on isolated variables, examining either exercise in controlled environments or the influence of a single environmental factor without physical exertion. Research investigating the combined and interactive effects of multiple environmental stressors alongside exercise remains relatively limited. Additionally, few studies have systematically explored the dynamic mechanisms by which the human body adjusts to such compounded stressors, particularly over extended durations or under challenging conditions. This research gap is especially evident in fields such as occupational physiology, sports science, and environmental health. While progress has been made in areas like heat acclimatization and altitude training, there is still a pressing need for comprehensive models that can simulate real-world scenarios where multiple environmental factors coexist and interact with physical activity [3, 4]. Addressing this gap will provide a more nuanced understanding of human adaptability, laying the groundwork for more effective strategies to enhance performance and well-being.

1.3. Research Objectives and Methods

The primary objective of this study is to systematically investigate how the interaction between various environmental factors and physical exercise affects human thermoregulation and broader physiological responses. By exploring these complex relationships, the research aims to deepen understanding of the body's adaptive capabilities and the limits of human performance under environmental stress, thereby offering theoretical and practical support for athletic training, occupational safety, and public health measures. To achieve this objective, the study will employ a comprehensive research methodology that integrates literature review, experimental observation, and case analysis. First, an extensive review of existing academic literature will be conducted to synthesize current findings, theoretical perspectives, and research gaps related to environmental physiology and exercise science. This will provide a foundational understanding of the topic and guide the development of experimental protocols. Next, experimental observation will be carried out under both controlled laboratory conditions and simulated field environments. These experiments will expose participants to various environmental conditions—such as high heat and humidity, low temperatures, and high-altitude hypoxia—while they engage in different intensities and durations of physical activity [5]. Key physiological indicators, including core body temperature, heart rate, sweat rate, oxygen consumption, and hormonal fluctuations, will be monitored in real time to assess the body's thermoregulatory and systemic responses. In addition to controlled experiments, real-world case studies involving athletes, military personnel, and individuals working in challenging environments will be analyzed to contextualize the experimental data.

2. Effects of Environmental Factors on Human Thermoregulation

2.1. High-Temperature Environments

In high-temperature environments, maintaining thermal balance becomes a critical physiological challenge. To regulate core body temperature, the human body responds by increasing skin blood flow and activating sweat glands to promote evaporative cooling [1, 6]. However, when the ambient temperature approaches or exceeds the skin surface temperature, the effectiveness of heat dissipation via radiation and convection is greatly reduced. In such cases, the body becomes heavily reliant on sweat evaporation. If the rate of sweating cannot match the internal heat production and external heat gain, heat begins to accumulate within the body, leading to elevated core temperature, dehydration, electrolyte imbalance, and a sharp decline in physical performance. Under prolonged or intense exposure, individuals are at increased risk of heat-related illnesses such as heat exhaustion, heat cramps, and even life-threatening heatstroke. These conditions pose serious threats not only to athletes but also to laborers and soldiers operating in hot climates.

2.2. Low-Temperature Environments

Cold environments pose significant challenges to the human body by accelerating heat loss through conduction, convection, and radiation. Exposure to low temperatures triggers several physiological responses aimed at preserving core temperature and protecting vital organs. One primary mechanism for reducing heat loss in such conditions is peripheral vasoconstriction, which narrows blood vessels in the skin and extremities, restricting blood flow and redirecting it towards the core to maintain a stable internal temperature. This process helps safeguard critical organs such as the heart, lungs, and brain from cold-induced damage. Additionally, the body initiates involuntary muscle shivering, characterized by rapid, rhythmic muscle contractions that generate metabolic heat to counterbalance heat loss. While these responses are essential for preserving core temperature, they come with trade-offs. Reduced blood flow to the extremities can impair dexterity, making fine motor tasks more difficult and increasing the likelihood of errors during physical activities. Prolonged exposure to cold conditions without adequate protection can lead to cold-related injuries, such as frostbite. Frostbite occurs when the skin and underlying tissues freeze, typically affecting extremities like fingers, toes, ears, and the nose, and can result in permanent tissue damage if not treated promptly. Furthermore, extended exposure to cold environments without sufficient insulation or movement can lead to hypothermia, a condition where the body's core temperature drops below 35°C (95°F), impairing normal physiological functions. Symptoms of hypothermia include confusion, slurred speech, loss of coordination, and diminished shivering as the condition progresses. At critically low core temperatures, neuromuscular function becomes severely impaired, leading to muscle weakness, loss of consciousness, and potentially organ failure if left untreated [7]. Hypothermia also significantly reduces exercise capacity, making it difficult for the body to perform strenuous activities or recover from exertion. Thus, while cold-induced thermoregulatory responses are vital for maintaining core function, they carry considerable risks to both physical performance and safety.

2.3. High-Humidity Environments

In environments with high humidity, the body's primary cooling mechanism, sweat evaporation, becomes significantly hindered. Sweat plays a vital role in dissipating excess heat during physical exertion [1, 8]. Under typical conditions, sweat produced by the sweat glands evaporates from the skin's surface, carrying heat away and cooling the body. However, in humid conditions, the air is already saturated with moisture, making it less capable of absorbing additional water vapor from the skin. This greatly slows or even halts the evaporation process, causing sweat to accumulate on the skin without effectively removing heat.

Consequently, the body faces challenges in cooling itself, and internal temperature continues to rise, increasing thermal strain. In response, the body attempts to produce more sweat, but since evaporation remains inefficient, this process becomes ineffective. This creates a cycle of sweating without cooling, intensifying discomfort and fatigue. If this thermal buildup is not addressed, it can lead to serious heat-related conditions. Despite active sweating, the inability to dissipate heat effectively results in an accumulation of thermal load. As internal temperature rises, the body's capacity to maintain thermal balance diminishes, potentially leading to heat exhaustion [4, 9]. This condition is characterized by fatigue, dizziness, nausea, and reduced physical performance. If thermal stress continues unchecked, heat exhaustion may progress into heatstroke, a severe and life-threatening condition marked by dangerously high core temperatures, confusion, altered consciousness, and potential organ failure. Heatstroke requires immediate medical attention due to the risk of severe complications or fatality. High humidity also places additional strain on the cardiovascular system, as the body works harder to pump blood to the skin to facilitate heat dissipation. Combined with physical exertion, this can result in dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, and diminished performance. To mitigate the risk of heat-related illnesses, individuals exercising in humid conditions should adopt strategies such as maintaining hydration, wearing moisture-wicking clothing, and reducing exercise intensity and duration.

2.4. High-Altitude Environments

At high altitudes, the human body must adapt not only to colder temperatures but also to decreased oxygen availability. In such hypoxic conditions, thermoregulatory efficiency declines due to a reduced capacity for oxygen-dependent metabolic heat production. The cardiovascular system compensates by increasing heart rate and elevating hemoglobin levels to improve oxygen transport, yet these adaptations are often insufficient to maintain normal performance levels. Physical endurance is significantly reduced, and thermoregulatory responses, such as sweating and skin vasodilation, are diminished. This combination of hypoxia and thermal imbalance can severely limit both aerobic capacity and heat dissipation, increasing the risk of fatigue, illness, and injury.

3. Effects of Different Exercise Forms on Human Physiological Functions

3.1. Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercises, such as jogging, cycling, swimming, and brisk walking, involve sustained, rhythmic activities that primarily rely on oxygen for energy production. These activities are widely acknowledged for their ability to enhance cardiopulmonary endurance, metabolic efficiency, and thermoregulatory capacity. Regular moderate-intensity aerobic training induces a series of physiological adaptations, including improved cardiac output, enhanced capillary density, and increased mitochondrial function. In terms of heat adaptation, aerobic training strengthens sweat gland activity, enabling earlier onset and greater volume of sweating. It also enhances peripheral vascular responsiveness, facilitating more efficient heat dissipation through skin blood flow. These changes contribute to improved heat tolerance and a reduced risk of heat-related disorders during exercise in hot environments. Aerobic exercise provides numerous measurable physiological benefits. For the cardiovascular system, moderate-intensity aerobic activities like brisk walking elevate the heart rate to 110–130 beats per minute, while regular training can lower resting heart rate by 5–10 beats per minute. Hypertensive individuals may experience a reduction in systolic blood pressure by 5–10 mmHg after 12 weeks of consistent exercise. Trained athletes often exhibit a 20–30% increase in stroke volume. Long-term aerobic training can enhance vital capacity by 10–20% in the respiratory system. Trained individuals may have a resting respiratory rate of 12–14 breaths per minute, compared to 16–18 breaths per minute in untrained individuals, and VO2 max can increase by 15–30%. Regarding the metabolic system, 3–6 months of aerobic exercise can reduce LDL cholesterol by 10–20% and increase HDL cholesterol by 5–10%. In individuals with type 2 diabetes, it can lower blood glucose levels by 1–2 mmol/L and reduce body fat percentage by 3–5% over time. Overall, aerobic exercise significantly improves human physiological functions [10].

3.2. Anaerobic Exercise

Anaerobic exercise, such as sprinting, weightlifting, and high-intensity interval training (HIIT), relies primarily on non-oxidative energy systems to rapidly produce ATP. These forms of exercise generate a significant amount of metabolic heat in a short period, placing acute stress on the thermoregulatory system. Unlike aerobic training, anaerobic workouts often result in localized muscular fatigue, lactic acid accumulation, and sharp increases in body temperature. In challenging environmental conditions—particularly in hot and humid settings where heat dissipation is already impaired—this rapid heat buildup may surpass the body's cooling capacity, leading to substantial thermal strain. In severe cases, individuals may experience heat-related symptoms such as dizziness, nausea, or complications like rhabdomyolysis, a condition involving the breakdown of muscle tissue that can affect kidney function and pose serious health risks. In terms of muscle strength, a 12-week anaerobic training program focusing on weightlifting can increase muscle strength by 20–30% in untrained individuals [11, 12]. For example, the one-repetition maximum (1RM) for bench press may rise from 60 kg to 72–78 kg.

Anaerobic exercise also enhances the body's anaerobic capacity [13]. After 8 weeks of high-intensity interval training (HIIT), the maximal anaerobic power can increase by 15–20%. Additionally, it promotes muscle hypertrophy. Muscle fiber cross-sectional area can expand by 10–15% within several months of consistent anaerobic training, enhancing overall muscle mass. Although it has less impact on aerobic endurance compared to aerobic exercise, it still contributes to a 5–10% improvement in lactate threshold, delaying the onset of fatigue.

3.3. Extreme and Endurance Sports

Endurance sports, such as marathons, triathlons, ultrarunning, and long-distance cycling, challenge the limits of human physical and thermoregulatory capacity [14, 15]. These prolonged activities require the body to maintain heat balance over extended periods, often under varying or harsh environmental conditions. With consistent participation and systematic training, athletes develop what is referred to as "exercise-induced thermoregulatory adaptation." This includes physiological changes such as an earlier onset of sweating, increased total sweat output, enhanced plasma volume, and improved skin blood flow management. These adaptations support thermal balance and help delay fatigue or heat-related complications. However, when such events take place in challenging climates, the risk of dehydration, electrolyte imbalance, and heat-related illnesses remains significant, necessitating careful hydration planning and environmental risk evaluation.

4. Dual Challenges to Thermoregulation from the Interaction of Environment and Exercise

4.1. Heat Storage and Core Temperature Changes

During high-intensity exercise in hot and humid environments, the body accumulates heat at a rate that surpasses its natural heat dissipation mechanisms. As exercise intensity increases, heat production within the body rises, which under normal conditions would be counteracted by sweating and enhanced blood flow to the skin. However, in hot and humid conditions, these cooling mechanisms become significantly less effective, resulting in a continuous elevation of core body temperature. When core temperature exceeds 40°C (104°F), the likelihood of heatstroke increases substantially. At this critical threshold, the body's thermoregulatory capacity becomes overwhelmed, and essential cooling processes, such as sweating and vasodilation, begin to fail. If not promptly addressed, this condition can lead to severe complications, including organ dysfunction, heat-related injuries, and potentially fatal outcomes.

4.2. Cardiovascular Stress Responses

The cardiovascular system is essential for delivering oxygen to active muscles and facilitating heat dissipation through skin blood flow [16]. During physical activity in hot conditions, the body must simultaneously increase cardiac output to supply oxygen and enhance heat loss mechanisms. This leads to significant increases in heart rate and stroke volume to meet these demands. However, when these regulatory processes are impaired, particularly under high-temperature conditions, individuals may experience variations in blood pressure or irregular heart rhythms. Such occurrences can pose serious risks for those with pre-existing cardiovascular conditions, as their hearts may face difficulty managing the additional strain, potentially resulting in fainting, heat-related syncope, or other adverse cardiovascular events.

4.3. Neuromuscular Function Changes

Elevated body temperature and the associated loss of electrolytes through sweat can significantly influence neuromuscular function. Increased body heat reduces nerve conduction velocity, slowing the transmission of electrical signals within the nervous system and impairing muscle coordination. Furthermore, dehydration and imbalances in electrolytes—particularly sodium, potassium, and calcium—diminish the efficiency of muscle contractions. This may lead to reduced athletic performance, heightened fatigue, and the occurrence of muscle cramps or heat-related neuromuscular challenges such as heat-induced muscle weakness. In severe cases, prolonged alterations in neuromuscular function can affect motor control, potentially resulting in physical mishaps or injuries.

5. Human Adaptive Mechanisms and Regulatory Strategies

5.1. Heat Acclimatization Mechanisms

Prolonged exposure to heat triggers a series of adaptive responses in the human body, collectively referred to as heat acclimatization. These physiological changes include an earlier onset of sweating, an increased sweat rate, and improved sodium reabsorption by the kidneys [17]. Such mechanisms enhance the body's capacity to manage heat stress and maintain thermal equilibrium during extended physical activity in hot conditions. The acclimatization process typically spans several days to weeks, during which the body incrementally becomes more proficient at dissipating heat and regulating core temperature. Over time, these adaptations significantly lower the risk of heat-related illnesses and enhance overall performance in heat-intensive environments.

5.2. Behavioral Regulation

Beyond physiological adaptations, managing heat stress also involves behavioral strategies [18]. Scheduling exercise sessions during cooler times of the day, such as early morning or late evening, can help minimize the effects of heat on the body. Modifying training intensity and incorporating extended rest periods are additional measures to reduce heat accumulation. Furthermore, wearing lightweight, breathable, and moisture-wicking clothing enhances sweat evaporation, promoting more effective cooling. In certain situations, the use of cooling garments or taking breaks in shaded or air-conditioned areas can further alleviate the strain on the body's thermoregulatory processes.

5.3. Nutrition and Hydroelectrolyte Supplementation

Adequate fluid and electrolyte intake before, during, and after exercise is essential for maintaining optimal thermoregulation and preventing dehydration and electrolyte imbalances [4, 16]. Timely supplementation with fluids containing electrolytes, particularly sodium, potassium, and magnesium, helps sustain the body's fluid balance and supports proper muscle and nerve function. Additionally, consuming carbohydrates and antioxidant-rich foods, such as fruits and vegetables high in vitamins C and E, can mitigate the oxidative stress induced by intense exercise, reducing inflammation and aiding muscle recovery. Effective nutrition and hydration strategies are fundamental to preventing heat-related illnesses and enhancing performance during exercise in hot environments.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the interactive effects of environmental conditions and exercise on human thermoregulation and physiological function, emphasizing the challenges posed by heat, humidity, and altitude to thermal balance, cardiovascular responses, and neuromuscular function across different exercise settings. The findings indicate that combined environmental and exercise stress can markedly alter physiological status and, if not properly managed, may lead to various heat-related health problems. Therefore, pre-exercise preparation and environmental assessment should be prioritized, together with behavioral adjustment, nutritional support, and adaptive training strategies to improve safety and performance under complex conditions. Future research should investigate interseasonal and interethnic differences to support the development of personalized exercise guidelines and public health strategies.

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