J Appl Physiol 129: 404–409, 2020.
First published July 9, 2020; doi:10.1152/japplphysiol.00357.2020.

RESEARCH ARTICLE | *Case Studies in Physiology*

The exercise pressor response to indoor rock climbing

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Submitted 6 May 2020; accepted in final form 30 June 2020

Callender NA, Hart PW, Ramchandani GM, Chaggar PS, Porter AJ, Billington CP, Tiller NB. The exercise pressor response to indoor rock climbing. *J Appl Physiol* 129: 404–409, 2020. First published July 9, 2020; doi:10.1152/japplphysiol.00357.2020.—This paper assessed the blood pressure, heart rate, and mouth-pressure responses to indoor rock climbing (bouldering) and associated training exercises. Six well-trained male rock climbers (mean ± SD age, 27.7 ± 4.7 yr; stature, 177.7 ± 7.3 cm; mass, 69.8 ± 12.1 kg) completed two boulder problems (6b and 7a+ on the Fontainebleau Scale) and three typical training exercises [maximum voluntary contraction (MVC) isometric pull-up, 80% MVC pull-ups to fatigue, and campus board to fatigue]. Blood pressure and heart rate were measured via an indwelling femoral arterial catheter, and mouth pressure via a mouthpiece manometer. Bouldering evoked a peak systolic pressure of 200 ± 17 mmHg (44 ± 21% increase from baseline), diastolic pressure of 142 ± 26 mmHg (70 ± 32% increase), mean arterial pressure of 163 ± 18 mmHg (56 ± 25% increase), and heart rate of 176 ± 22 beats/min (76 ± 35% increase). The highest systolic pressure was observed during the campus board exercise (218 ± 33 mmHg), although individual values as high as 273/189 mmHg were recorded. Peak mouth pressure during climbing was 31 ± 46 mmHg, and this increased independently of climb difficulty. We concluded that indoor rock climbing and associated exercises evoke a substantial pressor response resulting in high blood pressures that may exceed those observed during other upper-limb resistance exercises. These findings may inform risk stratification for climbers.

NEW & NOTEWORTHY This case study provides original data on the exercise pressor response to indoor rock climbing and associated training exercises through the use of an indwelling femoral arterial catheter. Our subjects exhibited systolic/diastolic blood pressures that exceeded values often reported during upper-limb resistance exercise. Our data extend the understanding of the cardiovascular stress associated with indoor rock climbing.

blood pressure; cardiovascular disease; heart rate; pressor response; rock climbing

INTRODUCTION

Rock climbing is characterized by short periods of high-intensity, intermittent muscle contractions (3, 22). The demands of climbing are more comparable to resistance rather than aerobic exercise (15), thereby evoking a disproportionate increase in heart rate relative to oxygen uptake at a given intensity (21, 28). Rock climbing, therefore, would be expected to induce a significant exercise pressor response and large increases in blood pressure (BP) to optimize oxygen delivery to working muscle (27), but there are currently no data on the magnitude of the response.

Indoor rock climbing is to be contested at the Olympic Games in 2021. Accordingly, data on the typical pressor response may be important for climbing-related risk stratification. This is particularly pertinent given that high peripheral vascular resistance increases stress on the myocardial wall and has been deemed the principal stimulus for left ventricular hypertrophy in the pressure-overloaded heart of strength and power athletes (23).

Only two studies provide any data on blood pressure (BP) responses in trained climbers, both during submaximal forearm exercise. Using the volume clamp method (6) and sphygmomanometry (20), climbers exhibited peak systolic pressures of 160–170 mmHg. However, the BP response to isolated forearm exercise is unlikely to reflect the complex nature of rock climbing, which involves movements of both upper and lower limbs, in addition to co-contractions of the various trunk stabilizers. Breath holding or Valsalva-like efforts during climbing tasks would also be expected to increase the pressor response via transmission of intrathoracic and intra-abdominal pressures to the aorta and heart (24). Studies evaluating the BP responses to dynamic whole body climbing would, therefore, be informative. The aforementioned studies are limited by their use of noninvasive measures, with sphygmomanometry shown to underestimate systolic pressure by ~13% (31).

We propose the use of arterial catheterization to record BP responses in climbers. Arterial catheterization has been used to record accurate BPs during dynamic exercise like weightlifting (7, 19) and rowing (5). Relative to other methods, arterial catheters have the advantage of beat-by-beat sampling, and provide data on the temporal BP response during climbing in which isometric muscle contraction times can be brief [~8 s (30)]. Finally, given that subjects are expected to breath hold and/or perform Valsalva-like efforts during difficult maneu-

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vers, we propose to assess the magnitude of the mouth pressure response as a possible mechanism influencing BP during climbing. Therefore, the aim of this case-study was to assess the acute effects of indoor rock climbing, and common training exercises, on the magnitude of the BP, heart rate, and mouth pressure responses in well-trained climbers.

CASE PRESENTATION

Subjects

Six well-trained male rock climbers volunteered to participate (Table 1). All had a minimum of 5 yr of climbing experience, were engaged in 11.3 ± 3.1 h of climbing or sports-specific training per week (range 6–15 h), and were of a moderate-to-high proficiency [*International Rock Climbing Research Association* mean 25 ± 3.5; range 21–30 redpoint (5a)]. The study was approved by the Sheffield Hallam University Research Ethics Committee and conformed to the principles outlined in the *Declaration of Helsinki*. Before participation, subjects provided written, informed consent and completed a pretest medical questionnaire. Subjects were free from prediagnosed cardiovascular disease and were not taking medication. Subjects abstained from intense exercise for 48 h, alcohol and caffeine for 12 h, and food for 3 h before testing.

Experimental Overview

Subjects attended the laboratory on a single occasion. Basic anthropometry was performed via bioelectrical impedance (InBody 720, Seoul, Korea). Subjects subsequently completed two boulder problems (short climbing tasks not requiring a rope) and three training exercises, each separated by ~5 min to reflect the rest periods of a typical climbing session. Intra-arterial blood pressure, heart rate, and mouth pressure were continuously assessed.

Boulder Problems

Boulder problems were created by an internationally accredited climbing route setter and were designed to prevent excessive perturbations in the phlebostatic axis. Each route was six moves in length, was previously unattempted by our subjects, and performed above in situ safety matting. The difficulty and subjective intensity of the boulder problems were agreed by consensus of three expert climbers, and equated to 6b and 7a+ on the Fontainebleau scale for *boulder problem 1* and *2*. Both problems had an overhanging angle of 45 degrees, with minimal requirement for flexion of the right hip. The intended sequence of moves was described to subjects before their first attempt, and each climb was attempted once. Duration of ascent was measured from the moment contact was lost with the floor and terminated when the subject fell or reached the finishing hold with both hands.

Training Exercises

Maximum voluntary contraction (MVC) isometric pull-up. A maximal isometric pull-up was performed on a pull-up bar with the elbow at 90° of flexion. A waist harness was attached to anchor the subject to an immovable point directly below, in series with a load cell, and MVC was expressed as the peak force from the load cell in addition to the total mass, including the arterial line, manometer, giving set, rucksack, and body mass.

80% MVC pull-up. Subjects performed isotonic pull-ups to fatigue from straight arms to a position whereby the chin was above the level of the bar. Mass was added via the waist harness to achieve a load equivalent to 80% of the MVC isometric pull.

Campus board. Subjects undertook a three-movement footless "laddering" sequence on a standard campus board (23-mm holds at 21-cm spacing on a 20° overhanging board), repeating the sequence up and down to fatigue (defined as contact with the floor). Duration and movement number were recorded from a single attempt.

Measurements

Blood pressure and heart rate. Following 5 min of quiet sitting, BP was assessed via arm cuff sphygmomanometry (Boso Varius, Jungingen, Germany). Thereafter, the right femoral artery was located using ultrasound and cannulated aseptically with an 8-cm, 20-gauge Teflon-coated catheter (Vygon Leadercath; Vygon, Ecouen, France). The femoral artery was chosen to allow uninhibited movement of the arms during the physical assessments and to facilitate a pressure trace that most accurately reflected central hemodynamics. The catheter was connected to an arterial line with an incorporated transducer (DPT-6000; Codan, Forstinning, Germany; range −300 to +300 mmHg, sensitivity ±1%, hysteresis 1.66%), which was aligned with the presumed level of the right atrium. The line contained 0.9% sodium chloride, running at 3 mL/h from a

Table 1. *Subject characteristics*

Subject	Age, yr	Stature, cm	Mass, kg	Body fat, %	Systolic BP, mmHg	Diastolic BP, mmHg	MVC, N
1	20.3	182.7	88.0	6.1	128	84	800
2	32.9	174.6	55.7	8.3	128	72	447
3	26.1	168.0	65.0	16.0	124	68	295
4	28.5	187.0	75.9	9.0	130	78	557
5	26.1	182.0	74.8	9.7	127	76	490
6	32.4	172.0	59.3	8.7	136	88	726
Mean	**27.7**	**177.7**	**69.8**	**9.6**	**129**	**78**	**553**
SD	4.7	7.3	12.1	3.4	4.0	7.4	186
Min	20.3	168.0	55.7	6.1	124	68	295
Max	32.9	187.0	88.0	16.0	136	88	800

MVC, maximum voluntary contraction isometric pull (force applied to load cell); BP, blood pressure. Note: resting systolic/diastolic BP recorded via sphygmomanometry.

pressurized 500-mL reservoir bag, which was stored in a small rucksack (total 1.94 kg) worn by the subject. Beat-by-beat BP and heart rate were obtained via the arterial line, and the system was zeroed while subjects were in a standing position immediately before each task. Mean arterial pressure (MAP) was automatically calculated as the average of all data points sampled in each waveform. Heart rate was taken as the peak-to-peak pressure interval and averaged every three waveforms.

Mouth pressure. In an effort to estimate the increases in intrathoracic and intra-abdominal pressures and any potential influence on BP, mouth pressure was obtained using a digital manometer (ST-8890; Amecal, Newcastle, UK; sensitivity 0.03%) attached to a well-sealing mouthpiece and contained within the rucksack. After coaching, subjects were asked to maintain an open glottis during any periods of breath holding or straining, per MacDougall et al. (19), thus allowing transmission of the intrathoracic air column to the transducer via the mouthpiece. In-task pressures were compared with atmospheric conditions (i.e., 0 mmHg gauge pressure).

Data Processing

BP and heart rate signals were amplified using a Powerlab Amplifier and Powerlab 4/35 data acquisition system (ADInstruments, Dunedin, NZ), sampled at 200 kHz, and displayed digitally in LabChart (ADInstruments). Mouth pressure was sampled at 1 Hz and recorded via the manometer's proprietary software to the same laptop computer used for BP and heart rate. All digital signals were aligned in Microsoft Excel from their individual time stamps recorded in relation to the computer's internal clock. Force data during the MVC isometric pull was recorded using an S-type load cell (Weone YZC-516, Guangdong, China; range 0–100 kg, sensitivity 0.02%, hysteresis 0.1%) amplified by a USB-run Wheatstone bridge amplifier (PhidgetBridge, Phidgets, Inc., Calgary, AB, Canada) and recorded to a laptop computer running a bespoke program. All values are expressed as means ± SD.

RESULTS

Boulder Problems

BP, heart rate, and mouth pressure responses to the boulder problems and training exercises are shown in Table 2. All subjects completed *boulder problem 1* in 6.0 ± 0.0 moves and in a mean duration of 14.2 ± 3.3 s (range 9.3–17.7 s). Three subjects successfully completed *boulder problem 2* (all 6 moves), and the group mean ($n = 6$) for total moves was 5.0 ± 1.1 moves (range 3–6) and duration was 17.2 ± 2.5 s (range 13.2–19.8 s). Pretask systolic BP for *boulder problem 1* was 126 ± 13 mmHg and peaked at 175 ± 27 mmHg (an increase of 40 ± 25%). Pretask systolic BP for boulder problem 2 was 141 ± 14 mmHg and peaked at 200 ± 17 mmHg (an increase of 44 ± 21%). The individual systolic BP response range was 142/88–213/145 mmHg for *boulder problem 1*, and 181/110–223/185 mmHg for *boulder problem 2*. MAP, heart rate, and mouth pressure all increased substantially above pretask values (Table 2).

Training Exercises

MVC isometric pull-up. Peak force delivered to the load cell was 553 ± 186 N (range 295–800 N), equating to a total suspended mass of 126.1 ± 26.7 kg (range 97.1–171.5 kg; Table 1). Mean time to peak force during the maneuver was 5.5 ± 2.1 s (range 3.9–9.5 s). Peak systolic pressure increased above pretask values by 50 ± 27% (Table 2). The individual BP response range was 157/92–245/163 mmHg.

80% MVC pull-Up. Subjects achieved 3.3 ± 1.4 repetitions (range 2–6). The mean total mass lifted was 102.5 ± 21.4 kg (range 77.65–137.2 kg). Data from one subject was omitted due to sample line occlusion. Peak systolic pressure increased above pretask values by 51 ± 22% (Table 2). The individual BP response range was 173/113–273/189 mmHg.

Campus board. The campus board task elicited the longest task duration, 29.7 ± 13.7 s (range 6.9–44.4 s), with subjects

Table 2. *BP, heart rate, and mouth pressure responses to boulder problems and training exercises*

	Systolic BP, mmHg	Diastolic BP, mmHg	MAP, mmHg	Heart Rate, beats/min	Mouth Pressure, mmHg
Boulder problem 1					
Pretask	126 ± 13	74 ± 12	95 ± 11	106 ± 24	0 ± 0
In task (peak)	175 ± 27	116 ± 19	140 ± 22	154 ± 24	27 ± 30
%increase	40 ± 25	64 ± 51	50 ± 38	47 ± 24	N/A
Boulder problem 2					
Pretask	141 ± 14	84 ± 11	106 ± 11	104 ± 25	0 ± 0
In task (peak)	200 ± 17	142 ± 26	163 ± 18	176 ± 22	31 ± 46
%increase	44 ± 21	70 ± 32	56 ± 25	76 ± 35	N/A
MVC isometric pull					
Pretask	141 ± 13	84 ± 10	104 ± 10	99 ± 29	0 ± 0
In-task (peak)	211 ± 39	145 ± 39	169 ± 35	153 ± 15	34 ± 29
%increase	50 ± 27	71 ± 48	62 ± 38	62 ± 38	N/A
80% MVC pull-up					
Pretask	140 ± 15	85 ± 14	105 ± 14	112 ± 23	0 ± 0
In-task (peak)	213 ± 40	152 ± 33	179 ± 31	160 ± 21	25 ± 20
%increase	51 ± 22	74 ± 31	67 ± 26	47 ± 18	N/A
Campus board					
Pretask	132 ± 13	80 ± 9	100 ± 8	120 ± 17	0 ± 0
In-task (peak)	218 ± 33	147 ± 25	171 ± 25	187 ± 13	24 ± 5
%increase	67 ± 29	87 ± 40	72 ± 30	58 ± 24	N/A

Data are mean ± SD; $n = 6$. BP, blood pressure; MAP, mean arterial pressure; MVC, maximum voluntary contraction; NA, not applicable. Due to a sample line occlusion, BP and heart rate data for the 80% MVC pull-up are $n = 5$.

performing 20.0 ± 12.7 distinct hand movements (range 6.0–42.0). Peak systolic pressure increased above pretask values by 67 ± 30% (Table 2). The individual BP response range was 166/118–260/177. For the five subjects who performed the campus board task for longer than 20 s, data were divided into quartiles based on time (Q2 vs. Q4). Relative to Q2, there was an increase in Q4 systolic pressure (201 ± 31 vs. 221 ± 29 mmHg) and heart rate (164 ± 24 vs. 183 ± 18 beats/min). Similarly, there was an increase in Q2 to Q4 diastolic pressure (132 ± 22 vs. 147 ± 20 mmHg), and MAP (160 ± 24 vs. 175 ± 21 mmHg).

DISCUSSION

This study assessed the exercise pressor response to indoor rock climbing and associated training exercises. During the various tasks, we observed large increases in arterial BP in the region of 40–67% relative to pretask values. We also found that mouth pressure was periodically elevated throughout. These data indicate that indoor climbing and associated exercises induce a substantial pressor response, which may partly be underpinned by increases in intrathoracic pressures.

Our use of an indwelling arterial catheter to record the BP response is novel among climbing-related research, and it demonstrates that the technique may be a viable and safe method for obtaining temporal BP data during climbing. Arterial catheterization is a sensitive means of assessing BP and records beat-by-beat values at very high frequencies. According to the Association for the Advancement of Medical Instrumentation (AAMI), intra-arterial measurements are considered to be the "gold standard" in the assessment of resting BP (2). A disadvantage of the technique is that, as the measurement site is moved peripherally from the aorta (to brachial and radial arteries), the pulse waveform changes in morphology and is amplified, thereby potentially overestimating systolic pressure (4, 25). The femoral artery was chosen because it provided a pressure trace that most accurately reflected central hemodynamics and because the location was safely accessible and allowed uninhibited movement of the arms during the physical assessments. We are confident, therefore, that our data are the closest representation to date of the true BP response to climbing activities.

The highest group systolic BP relative to pretask values was recorded during the campus board task (218 ± 33 vs. 132 ± 13 mmHg), with one subject exhibiting peak pressures of 260/171 mmHg (Fig. 1). The highest individual BP was 273/189 mmHg, exhibited during the 80% MVC pull-up. Not only are these values higher than those reported in climbers during isolated forearm exercise (6, 20), but they exceed the peak pressures observed during other high-intensity exercises including rowing [192 ± 20 mmHg (5)], and upper limb one-repetition maximum weightlifting [197 ± 6 mmHg (7)]. Our values are also comparable to those observed during upper limb exhaustive weight lifting [255/190 mmHg (18)].

There may be several mechanisms that underpin these high exercise BPs during climbing and related activities. First, given that the campus board elicited the longest exercise duration (29.7 ± 13.7 s) and that systolic BP increased from 201 ± 31 to 221 ± 30 mmHg in the second-through-final time quartiles, BP cannot be explained exclusively by mechanical forces acting on the vascular tree and muscle mechanoreflex. Longer

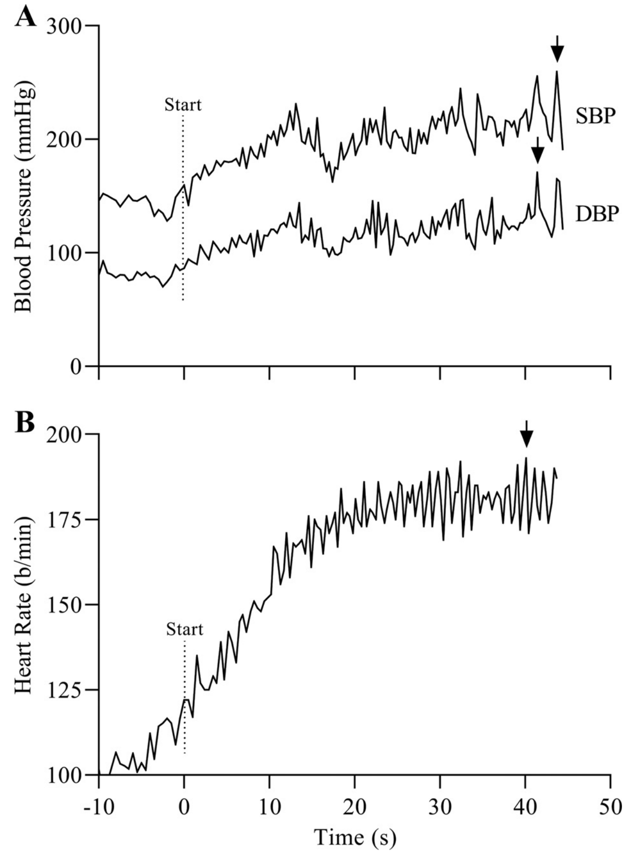

Fig. 1. Representative blood pressure (*A*) and heart rate (*B*) responses to the campus board task in a single subject. The peak data points are highlighted: systolic pressure (SBP), 260 mmHg; diastolic pressure (DBP), 171 mmHg; heart rate, 193 beats/min.

exercise durations are associated with greater stimulation of groups III and IV afferent fibers (27), and the large BP response was likely associated with the muscle metaboreflex and/or an increase in centrally mediated sympathetic output, both of which warrant further study in climbers of mixed ability.

Second, we identified periodic increases in mouth pressure, used as a noninvasive surrogate for intrathoracic pressure (19). Despite the simplicity of our measurement technique, it is well accepted that the Valsalva maneuver plays a major role in augmenting the BP response (12, 18, 19, 24), and we present the first evidence that well-trained climbers exhibit a degree of breath holding and/or Valsalva-like efforts during climbing movements, manifesting as mouth pressures that were intermittently raised (mean 31 ± 46 cmH_2O). Forceful contractions of various trunk muscles will increase thoracoabdominal pressure (10) which, in turn, stiffens and stabilizes the trunk to provide postural support (1), as observed during weight lifting (8). Breath holding, therefore, may serve an important function in supporting climbing-specific movements, particularly on overhanging wall inclines. While not directly assessed in this study, the transmission of intrathoracic pressures to the aorta and heart was a likely contributor to the arterial pressures observed (12, 18, 24). Despite the lower effort required for *boulder problem 1* relative to *problem 2*, breath holding was exhibited by our group during both climbs, suggesting that the phenomenon is somewhat independent of exercise intensity. Collectively, we propose that the large BPs observed presently may result from a combination of the high-intensity effort, the large active muscle mass including trunk musculature, and the elevated mouth pressures attributable to Valsalva-like efforts and/or breath holding.

With respect to heart rate, all tasks evoked a degree of prehension before exercise; i.e., active readiness before the commencement of the task. We observed the highest peak heart rate (187 ± 13 beats/min) during the campus board task, perhaps because it evoked the single longest exercise duration (29.7 ± 13.7 s). The second boulder problem, the more difficult of the two, elicited peak values of 176 ± 22 beats/min. Peak heart rate responses during climbing were below those seen in other climbing studies using tasks of longer duration; e.g., intermittent climbing to exhaustion [185 ± 11 beats/min (26)], and simulated bouldering competition [93% maximal heart rate (16)]. Nevertheless, the observation that heart rate is substantially elevated during climbing, congruent with high femoral arterial pressures, suggests that rock climbing and associated activities are likely to evoke considerable myocardial demand.

High-intensity intermittent activities that evoke periods of elevated vascular resistance with little to no change in cardiac output have been proposed to stimulate modifications in cardiac size and shape (23), including myocardial hypertrophy (14), and temporarily affect vascular reactivity (13). It is plausible that chronic exposure to the BPs we have observed during climbing may be sufficient to induce myocardial and vascular remodeling. While the clinical significance of such long-term adaptations continue to be debated (9, 29), echocardiographic studies in climbers would be informative, particularly in guiding physician/athlete decisions on sports participation at the recreational and elite levels (17).

In conclusion, this is the first report of the blood pressure responses to indoor rock climbing in healthy, trained subjects. Indoor climbing and associated training exercises induce a pronounced exercise pressor response that substantially elevates both intra-arterial pressure and heart rate. The responses are likely attributable, at least in part, to elevated intrathoracic pressures associated with Valsalva-like efforts. More research is needed to elucidate the effect of chronic training on cardiovascular structure and function and its clinical implications.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the participants who generously gave their time for the study, ADInstruments for the loan of equipment, Vygon UK for the donation of consumables, and The Climbing Works (Sheffield, UK) for the use of their venue. We also thank Dr. Sam Oliver and Dr. Jamie Macdonald for their comments on an early draft of the proposal.

GRANTS

This study received the donation of consumables and loan of equipment from Vygon UK and ADInstruments, respectively. No external funding was received.

DISCLOSURES

N. Callender is a co-owner of a commercial indoor climbing gym. No other authors have any conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

N.A.C., P.W.H., P.S.C., A.J.P., and N.B.T. conceived and designed research; N.A.C., P.W.H., and C.P.B. performed experiments; N.A.C., G.M.R., A.J.P., C.P.B., and N.B.T. analyzed data; N.A.C., P.W.H., G.M.R., P.S.C., A.J.P., C.P.B., and N.B.T. interpreted results of experiments; N.A.C. and N.B.T. drafted manuscript; N.A.C., P.W.H., G.M.R., P.S.C., A.J.P., C.P.B., and N.B.T. edited and revised manuscript; N.A.C., P.W.H., G.M.R., P.S.C., A.J.P., C.P.B., and N.B.T. approved final version of manuscript; N.B.T. prepared figures.

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